

Navigating Livelihood Strategies, Social Resilience, and Policy Invisibility among the Informal Workforce along the Sea Beach of Odisha



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COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

(An Autonomous Research Institute supported by Indian Council of Social Science Research,
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and Policy Invisibility among the Informal
Workforce along the Sea Beach of Odisha**

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ABSTRACT

At Puri Sea Beach, Odisha, informal workers, such as vendors, fishermen, and service providers, form the backbone of the local economy but face profound vulnerabilities due to the absence of social protections and economic instability. This study examines the socioeconomic dimensions, survival strategies, and challenges faced by these workers, emphasising the role of social networks, institutional engagement, and policy interventions. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating primary field surveys, structured questionnaires, and focus group discussions across diverse informal occupations. While many respondents report stable incomes, job insecurity, healthcare gaps, and discrimination persist. Economic resilience stems largely from informal strategies like borrowing and social networking, though formal institutional support remains sporadic and inadequate, particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Labour organisation efforts exist but are fragmented and vary across occupations. The findings underscore the critical need for inclusive policy interventions that recognise informal employment within broader development frameworks. Expanding social security, enforcing labour protections, and integrating informal workers into planning are key steps toward sustaining these vital livelihoods.

Keywords: Informal employment, group dynamics, social security, economic coping strategies, livelihood sustainability, and labour unions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The informal economy has garnered significant attention due to its critical role in supporting the livelihoods of millions, particularly in developing nations (Kraemer-Mbula and Wunsch-Vincent 2016; Williams and Lansky 2013). This dynamic and multifaceted sector is shaped by diverse livelihood strategies, varying levels of formality, and unique institutional frameworks. Informal employment encompasses a wide range of activities driven by economic necessity, cultural practices, and policy environments (Chen, Jhabvala and Lund 2002; Vallega 2003; Williams and Nadin 2012). In Odisha, informal livelihoods—especially those of beach practitioners—provide valuable insights into survival strategies and the broader implications for policymaking. The following scholarly literature offers a systematic review of global and regional research on informal employment, with particular attention to its defining characteristics, evolving dynamics, and policy significance. It synthesises key insights, identifies existing research gaps, and underscores the critical role of the informal sector in shaping beach-based livelihoods in Odisha.

1.1 The Complex Realities of Informal Beach Livelihoods

Informal employment, particularly in coastal areas, is a complex, dynamic and multifaceted sector shaped by education, social networks, and economic constraints. Among the most visible participants in this economy are beach vendors—individuals who rely on tourism and local commerce to sustain their livelihoods (Henderson and Smith 2009; Khumalo, Mthuli and Singh 2019). While their contributions are integral to the socioeconomic fabric of coastal communities, less than half of these workers operate within a framework that ensures long-term sustainability (Cisneros-Montemayor et al 2019).

What makes beach vending unique is its accessibility; entry into this line of work is relatively easy, requiring minimal capital or formal training. However, exiting the sector is another story—economic compulsions often bind vendors to this livelihood, leaving limited alternatives. Expanding their business or transitioning to a different field involves significant financial and logistical challenges. Despite these constraints, the informal nature of their work allows them to earn a livelihood with relatively low risk, capitalising on the opportunities this sector presents.

Within a narrow window of time—dictated by seasonal tourism and fluctuating demand—they must maximise their earnings.

1.2 Welfare Networks and the Gaps in Social Security

In colonial India, informal welfare systems and community networks were lifelines for industrial workers, stepping in where formal government and employer support were absent. Even today, the welfare of unorganised workers remains a pressing national issue, demanding a structured federal approach, grassroots participation, and the formation of self-help groups to enhance service delivery. Despite constituting 93% of India's workforce and contributing 50% to the GDP, only 6% of these workers have social security coverage (Ramanujam and Rawal 2010). This leaves a vast segment of the labour force vulnerable to poor living conditions, legal neglect, and exploitation by unscrupulous intermediaries. Seasonal employment, the absence of clear employer-employee relationships, and undefined labour rights make them particularly vulnerable (Soga et al 2022). Women in this sector experience compounded socio-economic disadvantages, including illiteracy, poverty, and weak bargaining power, further exacerbated by inadequate legal protections (Bhoi 2015). The shortcomings of India's social security system for informal workers highlight the urgent need for broader coverage. As the informal sector continues to expand in developing economies, inadequate protections perpetuate low incomes and poverty. While post-1991 government efforts have attempted to address these challenges, implementation remains inconsistent. The Unorganised Sector Social Security Bill 2008 marked a step toward regulating working conditions and extending welfare benefits, but significant gaps persist for workers (Majumdar and Borbora 2013).

This study examines the complexities of informal livelihoods, drawing on case studies from Odisha to explore the interplay of multiple factors. The study seeks to understand whether collective action among workers can yield meaningful improvements in their economic conditions. Does organised mobilisation lead to better financial security and bargaining power? Or do individual efforts remain the dominant survival strategy in this informal economy? By delving into these questions, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how informal coastal workers negotiate their livelihoods, revealing both their resilience and the structural barriers they face.

Building on the above-stated objectives, this study ultimately seeks to enhance sustainable livelihood strategies and to inform policy frameworks that reduce vulnerabilities. By doing so, it aims to foster inclusive economic growth within the informal employment sector, particularly among beach livelihood practitioners and other informal workers in Odisha and beyond.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Area

The study focuses on Puri Sea Beach, a prominent coastal tourism destination on the south-eastern coast of India, along the Bay of Bengal. It's part of a 5 km stretch of coastal sandy beach within Puri's shores and forms the central section of a 67 km sandy coastline extending between Chilika Lake and the southern outskirts of Puri. The area is characterised by a tropical coastal climate, serves as a key hub attracting tourists and pilgrims, and seasonal fluctuations play a significant role in shaping economic activities. This vast beach provides livelihoods to thousands of people from nearby villages and even those from outside the state. It plays a vital role in local livelihoods, supporting a diverse informal economy comprising fisherfolk, street vendors, camel riders, horse riders, snack vendors, photographers, tea sellers, jewellery sellers, masseurs, bikers, and artisans.

2.2 Sampling Procedure

The study adopted a randomised sampling strategy to ensure objectivity and representativeness, designating diverse groups of beach livelihood earners as the primary sampling units. By employing random selection across stakeholder groups, the approach facilitated an equitable distribution that reflected the study area's geographical and occupational heterogeneity. In total, 200 units were incorporated into the primary data collection, thereby enhancing the study's overall output.

2.3 Data Collection

This study involved extensive interactions with key stakeholders among beach livelihood practitioners in Puri district, Odisha. The distinctive physical geography of beach towns like Puri contributes to their unique socio-economic dynamics. Beach livelihood earners can be broadly categorised into four groups: (i) individual

or group practitioners, (ii) owner-entrepreneurs, (iii) owners who are not entrepreneurs, and (iv) wage labourers.

Data were collected from each livelihood category, including camel riders, horse riders, snack vendors, photographers, tea sellers, jewellery sellers, masseurs, and bikers operating along Puri Beach (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Detailed Categorisation of Livelihood Practitioners and Relevant Variables

Sl. No	Type of Beach Livelihood	Individual/ Group	Owner = Entrepreneur	Owner ≠ Entrepreneur	Wage Labour	Nature of Work (Service/Product)	Seasonal/ Year-round
1	Masseurs	Individual	✓		✓	Service	Year-round
2	Ear Budding	Individual	✓		✓	Service	Year-round
3	Snack Vendors	Individual/ Group	✓	✓	✓	Product	Seasonal
4	Pearl Sellers	Individual	✓		✓	Product	Seasonal
5	Fishermen	Group	✓	✓	✓	Product	Year-round
6	Tea Sellers	Individual	✓	✓	✓	Product	Year-round
7	Camel Rides	Individual	✓		✓	Service	Seasonal
8	Horse Rides	Individual	✓		✓	Service	Seasonal
9	Photographers	Individual	✓		✓	Service	Year-round
10	Jewellery Sellers	Individual	✓		✓	Product	Seasonal
11	Three-Wheel Motor Rides	Individual/ Group	✓	✓	✓	Service	Year-round
12	Four-Wheel Motor Rides	Group	✓	✓	✓	Service	Year-round
13	Motor Boat Rides	Group	✓	✓	✓	Service	Seasonal
14	Chair Renters	Individual/ Group	✓		✓	Service	Year-round
15	Puffed Rice Sellers	Individual	✓		✓	Product	Seasonal
16	Seashell Sellers	Individual	✓		✓	Product	Seasonal
17	Raw Cashew Sellers	Individual	✓		✓	Product	Seasonal
18	Bangle Sellers	Individual	✓		✓	Product	Seasonal
19	Coconut Sellers	Individual	✓		✓	Product	Seasonal
20	Handicraft Sellers	Individual	✓		✓	Product	Seasonal
21	Tour Guides	Individual	✓		✓	Service	Seasonal
22	Fishing Crew	Group	✓	✓	✓	Product	Year-round

Explanation of Columns:

- Individual/Group: Specifies whether the livelihood is primarily individual-based or involves a group.
- Owner = Entrepreneur: Whether the practitioner owns and operates their business independently.
- Owner $\neq$ Entrepreneur: When the owner hires others to operate the business.
- Wage Labourer: When the practitioner is employed by someone else and earns wages.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Demographic Profile

The survey of 200 individuals engaged in beach-based livelihoods presents a socio-demographic profile of a predominantly young, male, and marginalised workforce. Most respondents were aged 26–35, suggesting the sector is sustained by young adults with limited formal employment opportunities. The overwhelming male presence (94%) reflects a gendered division of labour, potentially shaped by social norms and barriers to women’s participation. Educational attainment is low: 57.5% have only a high school education, and just 4.5% hold higher degrees, indicating limited access to quality education and restricted mobility.

Telugu is the dominant mother tongue (47%), with Odia and mixed dialects indicating some degree of inter-state migration. The caste composition reveals that 78.5% of respondents belong to the Scheduled Castes, further underscoring structural exclusion. Nearly all are Hindu, and the majority are married and live in extended families, often supporting three or more dependents—reflecting both economic vulnerability and the burden of familial responsibility.

The migration history indicates that 17% of the population are migrants from diverse regions, including Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh, with some having resided in the area for over a century (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Migration History

Category	Sub-category	Frequency (%)
Migration	Migrants	33 (16.5)
	Non-Migrants	167 (83.5)
Migrated from where	Andhra Pradesh	5 (2.5)
	Berhampur (Odisha)	1 (0.5)
	Chhapra (Bihar)	6 (3.0)
	Delhi	1 (0.5)
	Darbhangha (Bihar)	2 (1.0)
	Jajpur (Odisha)	3 (1.5)
	Jamshedpur (Jharkhand)	13 (6.5)
	Kantilo (Odisha)	1 (0.5)
	Rajasthan	1 (0.5)
Since when	12 years	2 (1.0)
	120 years	6 (3.0)
	15 years	1 (0.5)
	150 years	3 (1.5)
	2 years	3 (1.5)
	20 years	1 (0.5)
	250 years	2 (1.0)
	8 years	3 (1.5)
	10 years	5 (2.5)
	5 years	7 (3.5)

3.2 Migrant Informal Workers: Tourism-based Livelihoods in the Coastal Economy

This case study highlights the informal labour dynamics, focusing on a diverse group of seasonal and daily wage workers whose livelihoods are embedded in the coastal city's dynamic cultural landscape. Among them are ear-budding service providers, camel and horse ride operators, each functioning within specific occupational networks shaped by migration, seasonal flux, and informal associations.

A distinct group comprises the ear-budding service providers, commonly referred to as “ear- cleaning people,” who migrate seasonally from Jamshedpur, Jharkhand. Collectively, operating in a group of approximately 18 members, they are multilingual, conversant in Hindi, Bengali and Odia. Their work is seasonal, typically spanning from October to April, aligning with the tourist influx. During

this period, individual earnings range between ₹18,000 and ₹20,000 per month. Following the peak season, they migrate to other locations in search of similar opportunities to sustain their livelihood.

Camel rides operate as a dual-shift enterprise. Each camel is managed by two daily wage labourers, both originating from Mangala Ghat, Puri. The first shift runs from 6:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., followed by the second from 1:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Each worker receives a fixed daily wage of ₹500 from the camel owner. In peak tourist seasons, a single camel ride operation generates approximately ₹60,000 or more per month. All earnings are deposited with the owner at the end of each day, indicating a tightly controlled ownership-labour structure. A similar wage-labour pattern is observed among horse-ride providers affiliated with the DGPS (a local association). The horse owners are responsible for procuring and maintaining the horses; they invest approximately ₹1,00,000 in purchasing horses from Uttar Pradesh and also provide comprehensive support to their workers and work-related necessities. The horse handlers, like the camel riders, receive fixed daily wages.

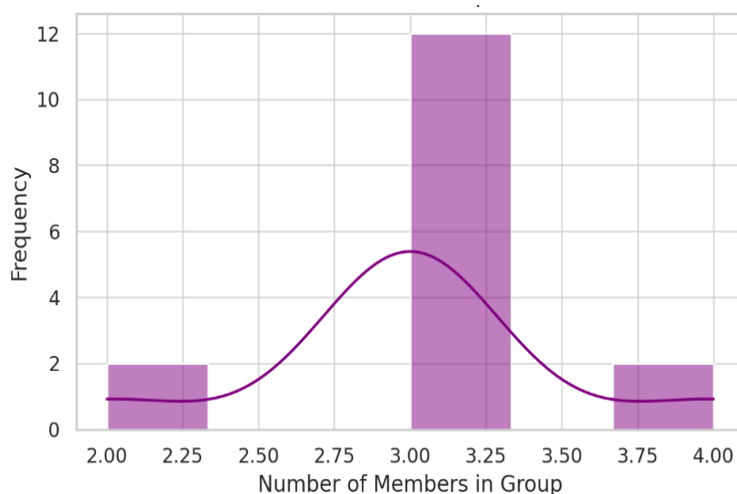
These micro-level insights reveal the deeply embedded nature of seasonal informal work, interlinked with inter-state migration, tourism cycles, and informal associations. The livelihoods of these workers, while critical to the tourist influx, remain precarious and heavily dependent on patron-client structures and seasonal fluctuations.

3.3 Group Dynamics

The group dynamics among informal sea beach livelihood earners reveal a nuanced interplay between individual autonomy and collective engagement. While the majority of respondents reported operating independently in their economic activities, many also indicated some level of affiliation with informal groups. These associations suggest a hybrid model of livelihood practices, wherein individuals may oscillate between self-reliant and cooperative strategies depending on contextual needs and available resources. Group structures among these workers tend to be modest in size, typically comprising two to four members (Figure 3.1). Within these groups, decision-making varies along a spectrum, ranging from consensus-based to leader-led and democratic models. The nature of these decisions primarily concerns financial planning, resource allocation, and conflict

resolution—critical elements for sustaining livelihoods in a resource-constrained, economically volatile environment.

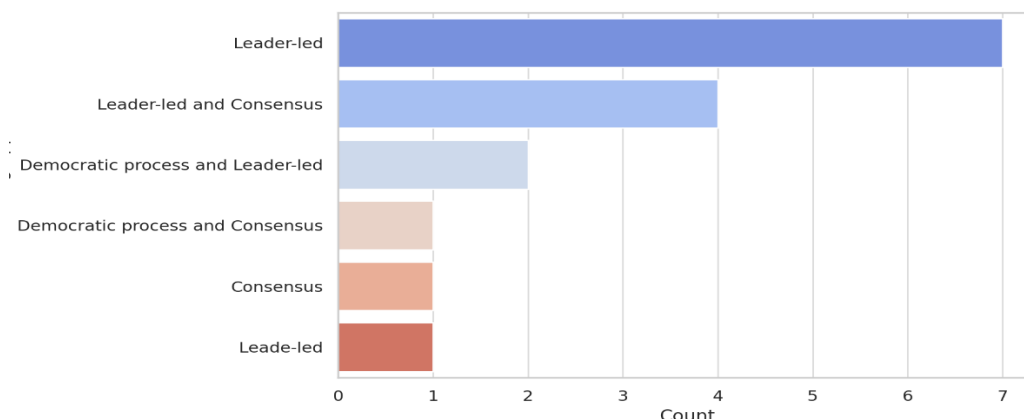
Figure 3.1: Distribution of group sizes



Communication within these groups is predominantly facilitated through direct interpersonal engagement. This includes community-rooted dialogues, structured meetings, and informal discussions that occur at varying frequencies—from daily to biweekly. Participation levels are generally high, suggesting that group members are actively involved in shaping collective outcomes and managing shared responsibilities.

Analysis of decision-making approaches across group sizes, as illustrated in Figure 3.2, further illuminates this complexity. Smaller groups often prefer consensus-based models, emphasising mutual agreement and shared responsibility. In contrast, larger groups tend to adopt leader-driven strategies, possibly to enhance efficiency and reduce coordination difficulties. Medium-sized groups typically employ a hybrid approach, combining elements of democratic, consensus, and leader-led processes. This variability underscores the adaptive nature of group decision-making in informal settings, where structural flexibility is key to functional governance.

Figure 3.2: Decision-making approaches across different groups



3.4 Occupational Job Satisfaction and Income Stability

Entry into this job market is relatively unregulated and accessible; however, exiting it entails considerable socio-economic risks. The combination of limited avenues for upward mobility, weak collective bargaining power, and the short-term nature of earnings compels individuals to remain in these livelihoods despite their precariousness. This structural entrapment was poignantly articulated by a camel rider, who remarked: “Who will give us employment? We have to be happy. The cycle is such—now I am here, and in a few years, you will find my son doing the same work. The market offers immediate returns, but if one considers shifting to something else, we cannot afford the frictional unemployment between the decision to leave and entering a new occupation.” His reflection underscores the intergenerational continuity of informal work and the inability to absorb transitional shocks, making occupational shifts virtually unattainable for many in this sector.

3.4.1. Livelihood Strategies and Resilience: A Case Study – The Story of a Sweet Seller

Bhagaban Behera, a 50-year-old informal worker, has been engaged in selling sweets along the Puri Sea beach for the past two decades. He is affiliated with the *Maa Kali Sweet Sangha*, a local association comprising 10 self-identified owners who regulate the informal sweet-vending economy in the area. Although Bhagaban did not pay any formal registration fee to become a member, he contributes ₹1,500 per month to the Sangha as operational dues or informal rent. His income is

commission-based; he earns ₹30 for every ₹100 worth of sweets sold. On average, his monthly earnings range between ₹15,000 and ₹18,000, depending on tourist footfall and seasonal variations.

Despite being part of an association, workers do not receive any social security benefits, such as life insurance, health coverage, or paid leave. Their livelihoods are entirely dependent on daily earnings—if they do not work, they earn nothing. The precariousness of their work is thus underpinned by the absence of formal labour protections and systemic support, rendering them vulnerable yet persistently adaptive.

A striking aspect of Bhagaban's occupational adaptation is his practice of walking barefoot on the hot beach sands—a necessity rather than a choice. He reports that wearing footwear impedes his mobility on the sand, especially during the peak summer months of March and April, when the sand becomes scorching. Despite the physical discomfort, he continues to work in such conditions, demonstrating a high degree of resilience that characterises many informal sector workers.

He primarily targets Bengali-speaking tourists, whom he identifies as his main customer base. When asked why he specifically approaches them, he explained that the majority of visitors to the beach are Bengalis, who, he said, are culturally inclined towards sweets. This strategic targeting reflects not only his understanding of consumer behaviour but also an adaptive marketing approach developed through years of experience.

This case highlights the broader dynamics of informal economies where workers, despite institutional voids and harsh working conditions, develop resilient livelihood strategies to navigate economic insecurity.

3.5 Associated Challenges

Economic challenges remain a persistent feature of the respondents' livelihoods. Irregular income, limited access to essential resources, and financial instability compel individuals and groups to adopt a range of coping strategies. These include leveraging communal support systems, redistributing available resources, and crafting adaptive mechanisms to navigate uncertainties. Shared tools such as boats and fishing equipment are managed through either individual ownership or

cooperative usage, often regulated by internally agreed-upon guidelines to ensure fairness and efficiency.

Social relations within these collectives appear robust, characterised by mutual support and reciprocal obligations. Such bonds extend into the broader community through informal exchanges, such as barter systems and shared civic responsibilities. These networks offer both economic resilience and emotional support, particularly during periods of hardship.

The data in Table 3.2 outline the primary sources of income among respondents and the occupational challenges they face. These challenges—namely, lack of job security, limited access to healthcare benefits, inadequate social protection, and discrimination or exploitation—are experienced to varying degrees across different professions. The percentage distribution within each category reveals the extent to which these vulnerabilities permeate informal employment sectors.

Table 3.2: Sources of Income and Associated Challenges

Main Source of Income	Lack of Job security	Limited access to healthcare benefits	Inadequate social protection	Discrimination and exploitation	Total
Masseur	14 (82.4)	15 (88.2)	14 (82.4)	9 (52.9)	17 (100.0)
Ear Budding	8 (57.1)	6 (42.9)	9 (64.3)	13 (92.9)	14 (100.0)
Soft Drinks	2 (28.6)	6 (85.7)	6 (85.7)	2 (28.6)	7 (100.0)
Food items	25 (64.1)	31 (79.5)	28 (71.8)	22 (56.4)	39 (100.0)
Chair Renters	15 (75.0)	18 (90.0)	8 (40.0)	12 (60.0)	20 (100.0)
Riders	10 (66.7)	10 (66.7)	8 (53.3)	7 (46.7)	15 (100.0)
Stationery Sellers	36 (69.2)	40 (76.9)	37 (71.2)	28 (53.8)	52 (100.0)
Life Guard	-	4 (100.0)	4 (100.0)	-	4 (100.0)
Photographer	11 (73.3)	15 (100.0)	13 (86.7)	3 (20.0)	15 (100.0)
Fisherman	11 (64.7)	13 (76.5)	15 (88.2)	11 (64.7)	17 (100.0)
Total	132 (66.0)	158 (79.0)	138 (69.0)	105 (52.5)	200 (100)

Across all occupational groups, respondents reported experiencing multiple, overlapping challenges. Notably, limited access to healthcare benefits emerged as the most frequently reported issue, affecting 79% of participants. This was closely followed by inadequate social protection (69%), with job insecurity also significantly widespread (66%). Although discrimination and exploitation were relatively less reported (52.5%), the figures remain substantial, indicating persistent inequities within informal labour arrangements.

In sum, while the majority of seabeach livelihood earners operate independently, informal group structures play a vital supplementary role. These groups contribute to resilience, resource management, and social cohesion, albeit within a landscape marked by economic precarity and the persistent pull of individualism.

3.6. Occupational Health and Safety Conditions (OHS) and Health Challenges

The analysis of OHS conditions and associated health challenges among informal workers, as presented in Table 3.3, offers a sobering snapshot of the precarious nature of work in the informal sector. The data categorises OHS conditions into three groups: *Adequate*, *Inadequate*, and *Not Applicable*. An alarming 93.0% of respondents (186 out of 200) reported inadequate OHS conditions, underscoring the widespread neglect of workplace safety in the informal sector. Only 2.5% (5 participants) reported adequate conditions, while 4.5% (9 participants) fell under the “Not Applicable” category, likely representing roles where safety conditions were either irrelevant or unmeasured. Particularly high rates of inadequate OHS were reported among fishermen (100%), chair renters (95.0%), photographers (93.3%), stationery sellers (92.3%), and food item vendors (89.7%). Conversely, only a small proportion of workers—such as lifeguards (25.0%), soft drink sellers (14.3%), and stationery sellers (3.8%)—reported experiencing adequate safety conditions. These findings suggest that occupational health infrastructure in the informal sector is gravely underdeveloped, leaving workers vulnerable to a range of occupational hazards.

Regarding health and safety challenges, responses were categorised as Yes, No, or Not Sure. A majority (60.5%) of workers acknowledged facing health or safety challenges, while 21.5% did not, and 18.0% were uncertain—highlighting gaps in awareness and possibly weak or absent mechanisms for hazard identification and reporting. Some occupations showed particularly high vulnerability: chair renters (90.0%), photographers (80.0%), stationery sellers (73.1%), riders (66.7%), ear budding workers (64.3%), and fishermen (52.9%). These roles are commonly associated with physically strenuous tasks, environmental exposure, and repetitive movements, all of which increase the likelihood of health risks. Conversely, occupations such as soft drink sellers (28.6%), food item vendors (33.3%), and

lifeguards (50.0%) reported comparatively fewer health challenges, possibly reflecting less hazardous work environments.

A clear correlation emerges between inadequate OHS conditions and the incidence of health and safety challenges. For instance, occupational groups with extremely poor OHS standards—such as chair renters and stationery sellers—also report disproportionately high rates of health problems. Interestingly, the data also hints at nuanced dynamics; while 95% of chair renters report inadequate safety, 90% face health issues, indicating that certain jobs may carry intrinsic risks beyond general safety conditions, such as prolonged physical exertion or exposure to extreme weather. The 18.0% of workers who responded “Not Sure” to questions about health or safety challenges reflect a critical deficiency in workplace safety literacy, suggesting an urgent need for awareness campaigns and training.

Taken together, these findings paint a stark picture of occupational vulnerability in the informal sector. With 93.0% of workers experiencing inadequate safety conditions and 60.5% reporting health challenges, the data highlights the pressing need for structural reforms. These should include implementing and enforcing basic safety standards, targeted health awareness initiatives to reduce the “Not Sure” category, and providing safety equipment and ergonomic training tailored to high-risk occupations. The evidence strongly supports the conclusion that informal workers are systematically exposed to avoidable health risks, a condition that demands immediate and coordinated policy intervention.

Table 3.3: Relationship of Occupation with Occupational Health and Safety Conditions (OHS) and Health Challenges

Main Source of Income	Occupational Health and Safety Conditions			Faced any health or safety challenges			Total
	Adequate	Inadequate	Not Applicable	Yes	No	Note sure	
Masseur	-	17 (100.0)	-	8 (47.1)	2 (11.8)	7 (41.2)	17 (100.0)
Ear Budding	-	14 (100.0)	-	9 (64.3)	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)	14 (100.0)
Soft Drinks	1 (14.3)	5 (71.4)	1 (14.3)	2 (28.6)	5 (71.4)	-	7 (100.0)
Food items	1 (2.6)	35 (89.7)	3 (7.7)	13 (33.3)	12 (30.8)	14 (35.9)	39 (100.0)
Chair Renters	-	19 (95.0)	1 (5.0)	18 (90.0)	2 (10.0)	-	20 (100.0)
Riders	-	15 (100.0)	-	10 (66.7)	4 (26.7)	1 (6.7)	15 (100.0)
Stationery Sellers	2 (3.8)	48 (92.3)	2 (3.8)	38 (73.1)	8 (15.4)	6 (11.5)	52 (100.0)
Life Guard	1 (25.0)	2 (50.0)	1 (25.0)	2 (50.0)	2 (50.0)	-	4 (100.0)
Photographer	-	14 (93.3)	1 (6.7)	12 (80.0)	3 (20.0)	-	15 (100.0)
Fisherman	-	17 (100.0)	-	9 (52.9)	3 (17.6)	5 (29.4)	17 (100.0)
Total	5 (2.5)	186 (93.0)	9 (4.5)	121(60.5)	43 (21.5)	36 (18.0)	200 (100.0)

3.7 Survival Strategies and Economic Coping Mechanisms

Table 3.4 presents a detailed overview of income sources and the economic adjustments individuals made during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on income fluctuations, receipt of government support, and perceptions of government assistance programmes. The findings underscore a profound economic vulnerability, particularly among informal and small-scale workers.

Table 3.4: Income Sources, Fluctuations, and Government Assistance

Main Source of Income	Fluctuations in income over the past year		Government support or relief measures during the pandemic		Experience with Government Assistance programmes			Total
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Positive	Negative	None	
Masseur	17 (100.0)	-	-	17 (100.0)	10 (58.8)	7 (41.2)	-	17 (100.0)
Ear Budding	13 (92.9)	1 (7.1)	9 (64.3)	5 (35.7)	5 (35.7)	7 (50.0)	2 (14.3)	14 (100.0)
Soft Drinks	7 (100.0)	-	-	7 (100.0)	2 (28.6)	5 (71.4)	-	7 (100.0)
Food items	39 (100.0)	-	7 (17.9)	32 (82.1)	22 (56.4)	17 (43.6)	-	39 (100.0)
Chair Renters	20 (100.0)	-	-	20 (100.0)	1 (5.0)	19 (95.0)	-	20 (100.0)
Riders	15 (100.0)	-	1 (6.7)	14 (93.3)	4 (26.7)	10 (66.7)	1 (6.7)	15 (100.0)
Stationery Sellers	52 (100.0)	-	-	52 (100.0)	14 (26.9)	38 (73.1)	-	52 (100.0)
Life Guard	4 (100.0)	-	-	4 (100.0)	4 (100.0)	-	-	4 (100.0)
Photographer	15 (100.0)	-	-	15 (100.0)	10 (66.7)	5 (33.3)	-	15 (100.0)
Fisherman	17 (100.0)	-	-	17 (100.0)	2 (11.8)	15 (88.2)	-	17 (100.0)
Total	199 (99.5)	1 (0.5)	17 (8.5)	183 (91.5)	74 (37.0)	123 (61.5)	3 (1.5)	200 (100.0)

A striking 99.5% of respondents reported experiencing significant fluctuations in their primary source of income over the past year. The only exception was a single respondent (0.5%) in the “Ear Budding” category who reported income stability. The most affected occupational groups were stationery sellers (52 individuals), food item sellers (39), and chair renters (20), all of whom reported complete income variability. While the ear-budding workers displayed a slightly better outlook—with 92.9% experiencing fluctuations and 7.1% reporting stable incomes—this still points to a broader trend of instability. These figures suggest that informal occupations were particularly vulnerable to the economic shocks of the pandemic, reflecting the inherent precariousness of livelihoods in these sectors.

Despite widespread economic disruption, only 8.5% of respondents reported receiving any government support or relief, while the vast majority (91.5%) did not. Notably, food item sellers (17.9%) and riders (6.7%) were among the few who received support. In contrast, other occupational groups—such as masseurs, soft drink sellers, chair renters, and photographers—reported receiving no aid at all. This reveals a significant shortfall in the coverage and inclusivity of government relief programmes. The limited outreach may be attributed to administrative bottlenecks, low levels of programme awareness, or the structural exclusion of informal workers from formal safety nets (ILO 2021).

The respondents’ experiences with government assistance programmes were mixed but largely negative. While 37.0% described their experiences as positive, particularly food item sellers (56.4%) and photographers (66.7%), a considerable 61.5% reported negative experiences. These negative assessments often cited delays, insufficient support, and difficulties in accessing assistance. A marginal 1.5% had no experience with government aid, possibly indicating either ineligibility or disengagement. The prevalence of negative experiences underscores systemic inefficiencies in the implementation and delivery of relief measures. Even among recipients, dissatisfaction was high, pointing to challenges in both programme adequacy and targeting (Gentilini et al. 2022).

3.8 Social Security Programmes, Social Networks and Community Engagement

Table 3.5 presents a cross-tabulation of occupational groups by awareness of social security programmes and participation in social support networks. This data offers meaningful insights into how the primary sources of income intersect with knowledge of and engagement in state-sponsored social protection mechanisms and informal support systems.

Table 3.5: Awareness of Social Security Programme and Participation in Social Support Networks

Main Source of Income	Awareness of the Social Security Programme			Participation in Social support networks			Total
	Yes	No	Not sure	Family	Community	Family & Community	
Masseur	9 (52.9)	6 (35.3)	2 (11.8)	2 (11.8)	-	15 (88.2)	17 (100.0)
Ear Budding	2 (14.3)	9 (64.3)	3 (21.4)	3 (21.4)	1 (7.1)	10 (71.4)	14 (100.0)
Soft Drinks	3 (42.9)	4 (57.1)	-	4 (57.1)	-	3 (42.9)	7 (100.0)
Food items	29 (74.4)	9 (23.1)	1 (2.6)	7 (17.9)	1 (2.6)	31 (79.5)	39 (100.0)
Chair Renters	6 (30.0)	9 (45.0)	5 (25.0)	-	-	20 (100.0)	20 (100.0)
Riders	6 (40.0)	9 (60.0)	-	1 (6.7)	-	14 (93.3)	15 (100.0)
Stationery Sellers	36 (69.2)	16 (30.8)	-	3 (5.8)	1 (1.9)	48 (92.3)	52 (100.0)
Life Guard	4 (100.0)	-	-	1 (25.0)	-	3 (75.0)	4 (100.0)
Photographer	14 (93.3)	1 (6.7)	-	-	-	15 (100.0)	15 (100.0)
Fisherman	7 (41.2)	10 (58.8)	-	2 (11.8)	-	15 (88.2)	17 (100.0)
Total	116 (58.0)	73 (36.5)	11 (5.5)	23 (11.5)	3 (1.5)	174 (87.0)	200 (100.0)

A majority of respondents (58.0%) demonstrated awareness of social security programmes, while 36.5% were unaware, and a smaller segment (5.5%) expressed uncertainty. Notably, awareness was most prevalent among lifeguards (100%), photographers (93.3%), food item vendors (74.4%), and stationery sellers (69.2%). These findings suggest that individuals in these occupations may have greater exposure to information dissemination channels or tangible benefits derived from such schemes. In contrast, awareness was markedly lower among ear-budding workers (14.3%) and chair renters (30%), highlighting a potential gap in outreach and programme visibility within these segments of the informal economy.

Engagement with social support networks was reported by a significant 87.0% of respondents, indicating robust informal safety nets. Among these, 11.5% relied solely on familial support, while a marginal 1.5% depended exclusively on community-based networks. Certain occupations—particularly chair renters and photographers—relied entirely on family and community support, suggesting strong interpersonal ties in the absence of formal institutional backing. Similarly, stationery sellers (92.3%) and food sellers (79.5%) reported high levels of social network engagement. Conversely, community-only support was less common, with limited representation among lifeguards (75%), ear-budding workers (7.1%), and food sellers (2.6%). This analysis underscores the intertwined nature of formal and informal support systems and points to the critical role of information access in shaping participation across both domains.

3.9 Policy Awareness and Challenges

The data presented in Table 3.6 explores the Pearson correlation coefficients among four pivotal variables: access to social security benefits, awareness of social security programmes, knowledge of labour laws and regulations, and awareness of government policies. Correlation coefficients are interpreted using significance thresholds of 0.01 (highly significant) and 0.05 (moderately significant), shedding light on the intricate relationships among these socio-economic factors.

The most prominent finding is the moderate positive correlation between access to social security benefits and knowledge of labour laws and regulations ($r = 0.344$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that individuals with a greater understanding of labour laws are more likely to access social security benefits, highlighting legal literacy as a crucial determinant in navigating and claiming these entitlements. In contrast, awareness of social security programmes shows only a slight positive correlation with benefit access, implying that programme familiarity alone does not substantially enhance the likelihood of utilisation. This distinction underscores the importance of equipping individuals not just with information about the existence of benefits but with the legal knowledge necessary to pursue them effectively.

Table 3.6: Pearson correlation coefficients

Variables		Access to Social Security Benefits	Awareness of the Social Security Programme	Knowledge of labour laws and regulations	Awareness of government policies supporting informal workers
Access to Social Security Benefits	Pearson Correlation	1	.087	.344**	.078
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.219	.000	.272
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	60337.180	287.470	332.930	134.480
	Covariance	303.202	1.445	1.673	.676
	N	200	200	200	200
Awareness of the Social Security Programme	Pearson Correlation	.087	1	.252**	.169*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.219		.000	.017
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	287.470	179.755	13.345	15.920
	Covariance	1.445	.903	.067	.080
	N	200	200	200	200
Knowledge of labour laws and regulations	Pearson Correlation	.344**	.252**	1	.126
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.076
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	332.930	13.345	15.555	3.480
	Covariance	1.673	.067	.078	.017
	N	200	200	200	200
Awareness of government policies supporting informal workers	Pearson Correlation	.078	.169*	.126	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.272	.017	.076	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	134.480	15.920	3.480	49.280
	Covariance	.676	.080	.017	.248
	N	200	200	200	200

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The interrelationships among the three independent variables—awareness of social security programmes, knowledge of labour laws, and awareness of government policies—reveal further insights. Awareness of social security programs is moderately correlated with knowledge of labour laws ($r = 0.252$, $p < 0.01$), indicating a meaningful overlap: individuals informed about their legal rights are more likely to be aware of available social protections. Additionally, awareness of social security programmes and awareness of government policies exhibit a weaker, yet statistically significant, positive correlation ($r = 0.169$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that while there is some alignment between understanding social security mechanisms and broader governmental support for informal workers, the integration remains limited.

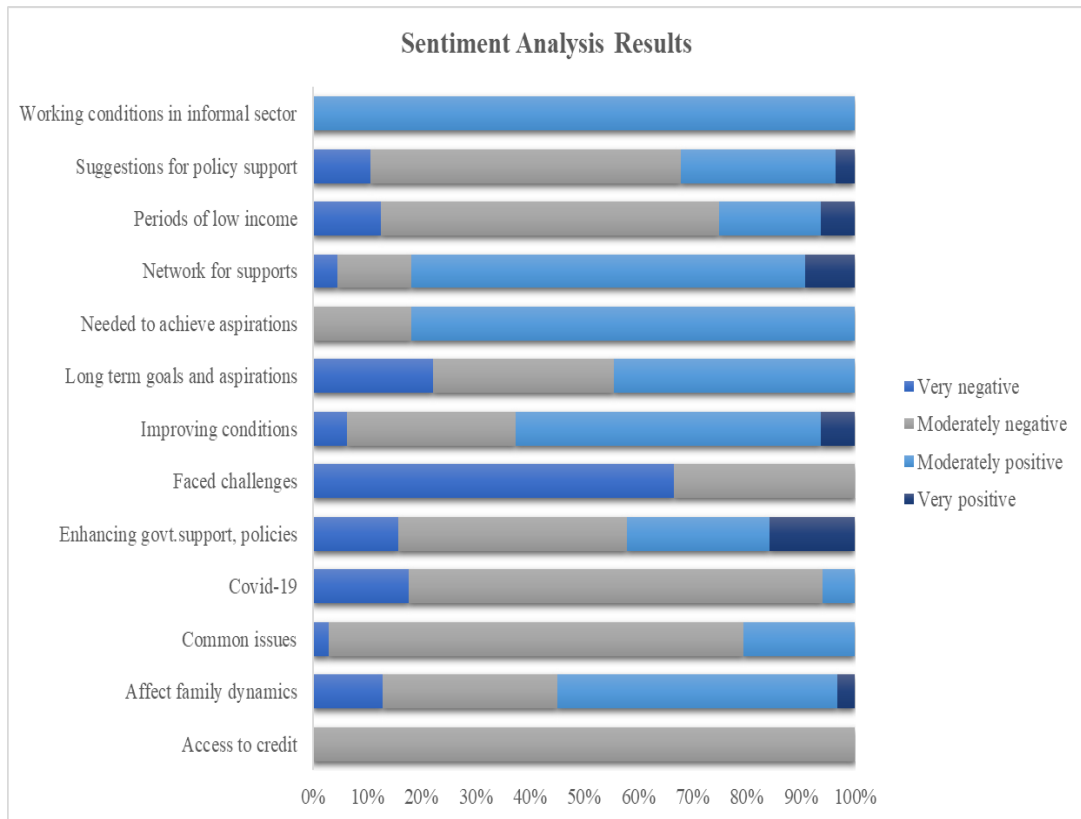
The broader implications of these findings are notable. Among all the variables, knowledge of labour laws emerges as the most consistent and influential predictor of access to social security benefits. This reinforces the notion that legal literacy functions as both a gateway and a tool for securing social protections. Consequently, policy interventions should prioritise legal education and capacity-building alongside informational outreach. The relatively weak correlation between policy awareness and other variables suggests a disconnect between government communication efforts and public understanding, particularly among informal workers. Moreover, the minimal and non-significant relationship between awareness of social security programmes and actual access to benefits suggests the presence of systemic barriers—such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, eligibility complexities, and inadequate enforcement—that inhibit programme uptake despite awareness.

3.10 Sentiment Results for Perception-Based Responses

The thematic analysis of sentiment-laden responses reveals a nuanced landscape of public perception across domains such as socioeconomic conditions, government assistance, group dynamics, policy frameworks, and individual-level challenges. Responses were categorised into four sentiment tiers—very negative, moderately negative, moderately positive, and very positive—enabling a structured interpretation of emotional and cognitive reactions (Figure 3.3).

A notable trend is the pronounced negativity associated with COVID-19 and a range of generalised societal issues. These themes drew strong dissatisfaction, reflecting public disillusionment with crisis management and systemic vulnerabilities. In contrast, themes such as *Enhancing Government Support* and *Suggestions for Policy Support* exhibited mixed sentiment. This duality suggests cautious optimism or partial approval: some respondents recognised beneficial interventions, while others identified gaps or inadequacies. Strikingly, the theme *Network for Supports* attracted the highest share of positive responses, underscoring the importance of community-based and social networks in navigating adversity.

Figure 3.3: Sentiment Analysis Results



Further insights emerge from specific sub-themes. For instance, access to financial resources—particularly *Access to Credit* and *Faced Challenges*—elicited minimal positive feedback, indicating structural barriers within economic systems. The category *Affect Family Dynamics* showed a mixed sentiment distribution, highlighting both the strain and adaptability experienced by families. Meanwhile, responses concerning *Working Conditions in the Informal Sector* revealed no negative sentiment but only a marginal number of positive responses, suggesting a general neglect or lack of discourse about this vital economic segment.

Three core interpretations can be drawn from these patterns. First, *economic vulnerability* remains a pressing concern, as seen in the overwhelmingly negative perceptions of limited credit access and inconsistent income. The muted responses to informal-sector conditions further signal a disconnect between lived realities and policy attention. Second, *resilience and social support* emerge as critical buffers.

The strong positivity associated with the *Network for Supports* implies that community structures provide essential emotional and material sustenance during crises, reinforcing the case for investing in local support ecosystems. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a *catalyst for hardship*, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. The intense negativity surrounding COVID-19 issues aligns with global findings on the pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations, reinforcing the urgency for adaptive and inclusive policy planning (OECD 2021; UNDP 2022). This analysis underscores a landscape marked by economic precarity, policy ambivalence, and social resilience.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study of informal employment at Puri Sea Beach reveals a stark paradox: economic resilience exists alongside deep systemic vulnerability. Informal workers, essential to the coastal economy, operate under precarious conditions shaped by seasonal tourism, socioeconomic marginalisation, and limited institutional support. While these livelihoods offer accessible means of survival, they are marked by job insecurity, erratic incomes, and a lack of social protection.

Demographically, the workforce is predominantly male, from Scheduled Caste backgrounds, and has minimal formal education. Though many have long-term involvement in beach-based occupations, their employment remains unstable. Social networks and community-based associations provide some economic support, but they are insufficient to counteract broader structural disadvantages.

The informal economy in Odisha reflects a dual reality: workers employ adaptive survival strategies yet remain trapped in cyclical poverty. Limited access to credit and formal financial systems exacerbates their vulnerability, particularly during off-seasons or crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Government welfare schemes often fail to reach these workers, hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies and exclusionary frameworks. Labour unions and collective action offer some improvement in wages and working conditions, but their reach is limited. Fragmented organising and weak labour protections perpetuate marginalisation. This pattern mirrors global trends in informal economies across Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, where similar exclusions persist, though more inclusive policies have yielded positive outcomes elsewhere.

The findings stress the need for a comprehensive policy shift. Recognising informal employment as a legitimate economic sector is vital. Policy efforts must prioritise social security, financial inclusion, and the formal recognition of worker rights. Only through integrated governance and grassroots mobilisation can the structural inequalities faced by informal workers be addressed, enabling a more equitable and sustainable economic future for Puri Sea Beach and beyond.

India's informal workforce, which constitutes nearly 93% of total employment, cannot remain invisible in policy discourse. The precariousness of livelihoods at Puri Beach exemplifies a larger systemic gap—one that calls for urgent intervention. A holistic approach that combines regulatory reforms, social security expansion, and grassroots mobilisation is crucial for fostering inclusive economic growth. If left unaddressed, the existing vulnerabilities will deepen, exacerbating poverty, social exclusion, and economic marginalisation.

This study advocates for a fundamental shift in policy perspectives—one that moves beyond viewing informal workers as transient or marginal actors and instead recognises them as central to economic sustainability. The time to act is now, ensuring that the economic engines of informal livelihoods are strengthened, not merely sustained.

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