

The Men behind the Metro-The Voiceless and Faceless Lot: Some Reflections of Metro Construction Workers in Bangalore

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Abstract: *Metro construction in Bangalore (Namma Metro) is going on in full swing. The agency for implementation is Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Ltd. (BMRCL) is a joint venture of Government of Karnataka and Government of India. The project covering areas such as M.G. Road Mysore Road, Sampige Road Yashwanthapur Peenya Industrial Area ,National College, R.V Road etc. It employed thousands of workers who are toiling exhaustively day-in and day-out to fulfill the task of the massive construction to make the lives of the bangaloreans easy. But these workers will always remain in the darkness. They may never have the affordability to commute in a metro. But they make city life easy for thousands of commuters by their construction. They do not even belong to Bangalore. They are migrants from Bihar, UP, Orissa, West Bengal. These workers work for the bare minimum which also denied to them. They work in shifts and have to work with pounding deadlines. These men are the only force to reckon with. When the Bangaloreans would be happy with their first joy ride in metro, these men would be happy with their meager income that would barely meet their minimum needs. This research paper is basically to deal with the plight of the construction workers who are behind the construction of the Bangalore Metro.*

Keywords: *Metro Construction Workers, Migrant Laborers, Struggle for Survival, Unorganised Sector.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization, Modernization has turned the world into a global village. Mankind has a huge demand for luxurious life and comfort. Construction industry is booming fast. Beginning with Kolkata metro, the construction of metro station has expanded upto Bangalore. Construction industry is creating new jobs and attracting several semi-skilled and unskilled workers to migrate from their native places where they find difficulties in getting jobs owing to their limited skills. The construction industry is a major source of employment worldwide, arguably the second largest after agriculture, and generally the primary one in urban areas – sometimes economic sectors such as manufacturing or services may present higher figures in official statistics, but in fact both construction and agriculture lump together a large variety of different economic activities. Metro construction is particularly labour-intensive activity, generating many jobs per unit of investment both on and off the building site. The construction industry makes a major positive contribution to the economy of all countries. The output of the industry worldwide is estimated at around \$3,000 billion per annum. The industry creates employment for more than 110 million people worldwide. The provision of large numbers of jobs at relatively low investment cost is particularly important in the developing countries, where the construction industry plays a major role in combating the high levels of unemployment and in absorbing surplus labour from the rural areas.

Construction laborers are those laborers who migrate from place to place like nomads in search of better opportunities for work. They mostly come from very poor family background and are mostly illiterate lot. So, they do not have market value. They become victims of exploitation in the hands of contractors, civil and construction engineers, middlemen and all those who are involved in the process of construction. Their life juggles between arduous shifts, pounding

deadlines, full fledged exploitation. They mainly live in dilapidated conditions with low civic amenities. They come from all over India and settle in wretched conditions in slum. They do not have proper space for living, improper drinking water facilities, unhygienic food habits, filthy atmosphere and other inconvenience which they have to struggle for.

2. NEED FOR STUDY

The construction workers especially in Bangalore Metropolitan Area face a number of problems like lack of continuous employment, inadequate wages and absence of social security. Among these problems, the most important and significant is the non-availability of jobs on a permanent basis. They come as migrant labourers from their natives in search of jobs. It is felt that if there are some facilitating agencies that can help in mobilization of these workers and address to their problems in getting them jobs, then condition of a lot of these workers can be improved. This will also raise the workers' as well as industry's competitiveness in creating a win-win situation for all. Hence the present study was outlined to understand the status of the working and living conditions of these workers together with the perspectives of the employers and other related agencies concerned with the industry.

3. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

- To understand the problems and prospects of the construction sector in the context of employment.
- To understand the living conditions of the labour force in the sector, their lifestyles, needs, aspirations and attitudes towards forming organizations.
- To arrive at possible opportunities to the labour force in the sectors for capacity building and for improving their employment potential, their quality of life.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research paper follows a qualitative research methodology. It consists of triangulation method based on Interview Schedule and Questionnaire method. Interview schedule was used to interview the respondents at 20 metro construction sites in the locality of Bangalore were chosen and was administered. The study followed a descriptive study design. The data thus generated is subjected to classification and grouping since the study is of qualitative nature. Considering the close similarity of the replies, grouping is done. No statistical tool was implemented for analyzing the data since the purpose of the study is to understand the severity of the problems alone.

5. PLIGHT OF CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN BANGALORE

The Bangalore Metro Rail Construction Ltd (BMRCL), is a PPP venture initiated in the year 2006 after the inauguration by PM Dr. Manmohan Singh, and work for Phase 1 of Namma Metro between M.G.Road and Baiyyappanahalli commenced on April 2007. The Project employs a bulk of the construction workers which consists of laborers from rural areas, The government requires that accommodation and other facilities should be made available on site. However, there are many sites where the living conditions of the metro construction workers are very appalling. Huts are dirty and overcrowded, prone to mosquitoes, rats and other pests. They are neither well ventilated in hot weather nor well heated in cold weather. There are no proper places for workers to have their meals and they are often found eating outdoors, exposed to dust in the air, without dining tables or seats. Overcrowding, crude sanitation, uncontrolled surface water drainage and poor rubbish disposal are typical of many slums. Water-logged habitats often lead to outbreak of dengue fever and other epidemics. The construction of Namma Metro is so demanding that the workers have huge pressure of work.

Moreover, discrimination in pay is widespread. A survey of metro construction workers in Bangalore, found open inequality in pay with women earning 10-20 per cent less than men for similar work. Moreover, women are often employed as part of a family work unit, as the piece-rate system encourages workers to engage their wives and children to increase output, and in these circumstances women may work but may not receive any payment at all. In one survey noted above, no female workers were on the payroll of any contractor. However, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has been working to improve the circumstances of women in

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India's construction industry. In many developing countries, many workers are informal or work in small companies. There is a widespread use of the contract system. Workers are employed on a project basis, with no insurance against periods of unemployment or sickness, insecurity of employment and lack of social protection. In addition, the construction industry exploits many migrant workers from the less developed countries. Most often illegal, their wages and conditions of work are far from decent. Earnings are both low and irregular. Inevitably, there is very little reliable data on earnings in the informal construction industry, particularly for those workers at the lower end of the labour hierarchy.

The rise in levels of air contaminants due to the construction of the Namma Metro is evident and reported, but the effect on health of the construction workers has not been considered and measured. The link between growing informality of work and deteriorating conditions of occupational health and safety in the construction industry is difficult to prove statistically. The most rampant diseases in construction are asbestos-related diseases, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, lung cancer and silicosis. In the construction industry, exposures to toxicants are commonplace. Suspended particulate matter (SPM), respirable particulate matter (RPM) and carbon monoxide are the most common pollutants emitted during the construction of the metro. So, workers always complain about chest pain, dry cough and asthma.

Data on accidents are notoriously bad. Each year, falls consistently account for the greatest number of fatalities in the construction industry. A number of factors are often involved in falls, including unstable working surfaces, misuse or failure to use fall protection equipment and human error. Recently in July 29, 2013, a 47-year-old supervisor was killed in an accident at the metro construction site at the Peenya Junction of Bangalore, when a six-ton iron frame that was being lifted by a crane, collapsed on him here on Sunday.

6. LEGAL COVERAGE-A FAR CRY

There are many laws and regulations applicable for the construction industry but their implementation has been notably poor. The construction workers are covered by mainly four legislations. These are: (a) Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1970, (b) The Interstate Migrant Labour (Regulation of employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1973, (c) Building and Construction Workers (Regulations of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996, (d) The Building and Other construction Workers Welfare Cess Ordinance, 1996.

There is also high incidence of child labour in this industry. However, the position of the construction workers continues to be unsatisfactory and much more needs to be done beginning from mapping the profile through the primary data on different aspects of construction labour to specific measures for the benefit of this labour. Academic literature also showcases that a large number of them belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In fact, two pieces of legislation—the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) 1979, and The Buildings and Other Construction Workers Act (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service), 1996 guarantee adequate protection and reasonable living conditions to the migrant workers, whether employed in industries, agriculture or construction. The said Act makes registration of employees mandatory and strictly regulates the working conditions such as wages, allowances, proper recording and maintenance of their employment details. It is illegal to employ workers without registration under the Act and the offenders can face punishment ranging from cancellation of licenses to prosecution. The second Act is specifically meant for construction sites and applies to any establishment that employs 10 or more workers. This Act also makes registration of the workers mandatory and stipulates a host of conditions for the safety, health and welfare of the employees. The conditions are so specific and include food, health facilities, drinking water, quality of accommodation, crèche facilities and a lot of welfare measures. The workers are distress migrants and are neither aware of their legal rights nor are empowered enough to demand them. Living conditions are so bad that they arrive in droves to take up any work that is available. In Bangalore, they speak different languages and are totally alien to the local culture and hence live in their own ghettos and get transported to sites like cattle. Although they have substantial numbers, since they offer no vote bank, no political party has ever taken up their cause. In fact, a key vulnerability is that they face cultural and

political marginalization. The political influence of the contractors and construction companies also ensure that the workers remain ghettoized, silent and invisible.

7. FACTS FROM EXISTING LITERATURE

7.1. Madan and Neha; Times of India 2010 reports: Report on Predicament of Construction Workers in Pune

- These construction workers do not get their minimum basic pay. They do not have any bargaining power. They have to haggle and bargain for their due money. Since these construction workers hop from one construction site to another, they often lose their money.
- The construction workers do not have a particular work schedule. They work for unregulated hours without any overtime payment facilities.
- There is no facility for any toilets, drinking water, canteen, crèche facilities in the construction sites.
- Especially, for the pregnant ladies it is very much difficult as there is no time for rest while working.
- Besides, the problems and woes discussed above, the construction workers have no social security & benefits in terms of labor welfare measures and provisions. They don't have provisions like pension and insurance schemes, maternity leave, accident and death claims, concession loans and financial aid for children's education and medical needs.

7.2. Report of the Committee on Unorganized Sector Statistics, National Statistical Commission

Unorganised or informal sector constitutes a pivotal part of the Indian economy. More than 90 per cent of workforce and about 50 per cent of the national product are accounted for by the informal economy. A high proportion of socially and economically underprivileged sections of society are concentrated in the informal economic activities. The high level of growth of the Indian economy during the past two decades is accompanied by increasing informal sectors. There are indications of growing inter-linkages between informal and formal economic activities. There has been new dynamism of the informal economy in terms of output, employment and earnings. Sustaining high levels of growth are also intertwined with improving domestic demand of those engaged in informal economy, and addressing the needs of the sector in terms of credit, skills, technology, marketing and infrastructure.

7.3. Report of G. Pramod Kumar, 2012--Death of Migrant Laborers in Tamilnadu

The death of 11 construction workers in two separate accidents in Chennai has finally shed some light on the safety and living conditions of thousands of migrant labourers employed in Tamil Nadu. While one of them died when a crane collapsed at a Metro rail construction site in the city, where six others were also injured; 10 died at a suburban engineering college when the wall of an under-construction stadium collapsed on them. In both the cases, the police have made some initial arrests. Finally, Chennai Metro suspended all work pending a safety audit. The accidents, although tragic, offer an opportunity that the state needs to act upon to ensure that it stands by the legal guarantees that are due to the workers.

7.4. UNDP Human Development Report

Research paper on migration and human development in India notes, gaps in data and the understanding of the role of migration in livelihood strategies and economic growth, have led to inaccurate policies and lack of political commitment. Migrant workers are a dispensable commodity in maximizing profits when local labour is far more expensive. For instance, while a local construction worker costs Rs 500 or more a day, a migrant worker is willing to do any work for Rs 250-350. This week's accidents are one of the high human costs of labour migration. The

UN report shows that the human cost of migration is high, not because of migration per se, but because of the poor implementation of laws.

7.5. Study Report on ‘Naka’ Workers, Construction Industry undertaken by the Ambekar Institute for Labor Studies, Mumbai

With growing Indian economy, construction industry in housing sector in cities and upcoming urban areas is booming. A special feature of this section of the construction industry and its workers is the presence of ‘Naka Markets’ at street corners in prominent places in urban areas.

The institution of Naka Market consisting of construction workers with diverse skills has tremendous potential if supported by appropriate policies and organizations. A typical Naka Market is a place where construction workers assemble in the morning. Builders and petty contractors come there and hire the workers for the day. In city like Mumbai, skilled workers get about Rs.400/- per day, less skilled people get about half of this amount. But since these workers are unorganized, they are often exploited by those who hire them.

8. KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Based on in-depth analysis of data, it seeks to portray various key findings:-

- 1) 72.3% of construction companies consist of 100-200 labourers.
- 2) Majority of construction labourers are living in Tin sheet (71.5%), Rubber sheet shed (17.8%) and Huts (10.7%).
- 3) Builder Company arranged temporary shed for labourers (22.8%) within the site.
- 4) A majority percentage of labourers (66.0%) are living in self-constructed temporary sheds nearby construction sites.
- 5) Builder made electricity provision (27.8%) in their temporary sheds.
- 6) A considerable percentage (71.7%) of labourers are having temporary sheds. They have no electricity provision.
- 7) The sanitation and hygiene of the construction site and the temporary shed are very poor (75.4%).
- 8) 73.8 percent of sites do not have any toilets or toilets having sub-standard quality.
- 9) 20.4 percent of construction sites are making provision of drinking water.
- 10) 34.1 percent of labourers have to depend on various sources like Bore well, and 31.4 percent on Tanker Lorry water.
- 11) 29 percent of sites do not have any water provision or water having substandard quality for washing.
- 12) 8.7% of construction companies have no facility for washing at all.
- 13) 63.3% of construction labourers have to take open bath as there is no adequate provision for bathrooms.
- 14) 72.2% of the companies do not pay medical cost incurred to the laborers.
- 15) In 18.8% of construction companies, builder and the laborers have to meet the medical cost incurred partially.
- 16) 64.2% of construction companies pay only Rs. 50-100 per day to their laborers.
- 17) 12.8% of construction companies pay Rs. 100-150 per day to their laborers.
- 18) 38.4% of the construction companies pay Rs. 151-200 per day to the skilled laborers.
- 19) 30.4% of construction companies pay only Rs. 41-60 per day to the unskilled laborers.

- 20) 7.2% of companies pay Rs. 61-80 per day to their laborers.
- 21) 74.2% of construction companies are not making provision of medical leave facilities.
- 22) 2.2% of construction companies made provision of medical leave facilities to their labourers.
- 23) 12.3% of construction companies provided medical leave to their laborers, but unofficially.
- 24) 64.8% of companies don't provide maternity leave to their laborers.
- 25) 12.5% of companies are making provision of maternity leave.
- 26) 13.8 % of construction companies provided maternity leave, but unofficially.
- 27) 14.7% of construction companies are making provision of holidays to their laborers.
- 28) 63.5% of companies are not making provision of compensation benefits.
- 29) 77.2% of companies are not making provision of insurance benefits.
- 30) 67.2 % of construction companies do not make provision of helmets to their workers while working. .
- 31) 52% of construction companies make provision of Hand Gloves and Shoes to their workers.
- 32) 29% of construction companies do not make provision of Hand Gloves and Shoes to their workers.
- 33) 44.9% of construction companies make provision of Safety Belts to their workers.
The reports lack adequate information regarding Safety Belts (29.0%) to labourers.
- 34) 55.4% of construction companies do not make provision of 'eye wear for cutting iron road to their workers.
- 35) 69.1% of companies do not make provision of safety materials and equipments to their workers in the construction site.
- 36) 66.2% of laborers have to work 8 hours having a spread over 10-11hr in a day.
- 37) 11.6% of laborers have to work 9 hours having a spread over of 11-12hr in a day.
- 38) 79.7% of construction companies are not making provision of 'Crèches' to the laborers' children.
- 39) 74.2% of construction laborers' children are illiterate. They are either at home or wandering here and there in the site when their family members are engaged in work.

9. DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

The study indicates the plight of the metro construction labourers in Bangalore. Majority of construction labourers have migrated from different regions of India. The construction sites have more than 100 labourers. The living conditions are so poor and the laborers are staying in tin-sheeted and rubber-sheeted houses. Some construction companies are making provisions of accommodation facilities to the labourers. The construction company is not making provision of any electricity or sanitation facility for the construction labourers. The sanitation hygiene of the construction site and the labourer's houses are found in poor condition. Majority of sites do not have any toilets. There is a limited provision of drinking water and the labourers have to depend on bore well, tanker lorry water and public water supply. The construction company is not making provision of water facility for washing cloths and cleaning their utensils. There are also the labourers who have to depend on open well, public water supply, bore well, etc. Majority construction site doesn't have any bathroom facility. Health of labourers is not at all matter to construction companies. Majority companies do not pay medical cost incurred to the labourers. While a considerable number of site labourers and company jointly meet the expenses incurred for the medical treatment. The women labourers are not eligible to get the maternity benefits. Moreover, the companies are not ready to compensate for employees having partial and full injuries and are not covered by life insurance. Adequate accident relief equipments like helmets,

hand gloves, shoes, safety-belts, protection eye wear are not provided to the construction labourers.

The wages structure of the construction labour is also found inadequate considering their labour. Majority of labourers are getting wages in between Rs. 50-100 per day. Leave facilities are not available for the construction labourers. Some companies unofficially give medical leave and maternity leave to the construction labourers. No holiday policy is found in majority of construction sites. The working hours of the construction labourers varied considerably. A majority of construction sites are making provision of 8-11 hours a day.

The labourers do not get healthy food from the construction site. Majority of companies are not making provision of better food for their labourers. Women labourers have to look after the food and home in addition to their regular work. The construction companies are not provided with crèches for the children. Majority of children are wandering around the site while parents are working at the site. Many factors like frequent migration from one area to another; economic problems cited by the construction labourers, makes it difficult in making provision of better education for their children.

10. CONCLUSION

The construction industry is notorious for the denial of basic workers' rights, particularly of freedom of association and the Right to Collective Bargaining. Harsh behaviour by employers and contractors in attempting to prevent the organization of trade unions, is commonplace. There are numerous examples of construction workers being sacked or victimized for legitimate union activity. As with all informal economy workers, government regulation affects every aspect of workers' livelihoods, rights and conditions of work. A fundamental and crucial objective of construction workers' organizations is therefore, to win recognition and representation in government agencies that have jurisdiction over the sector. Yet, the construction workers are not able to gain access to welfare benefits, as the Welfare Board ruled that a worker has to present a certificate from the employer and contractor that she/he has worked for 90 days in the site. This is, of course, virtually impossible in the informal construction industry, given the prevalence of day-labour, lack of contracts, long sub-contracting chains and high levels of illiteracy among the workers.

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