

## Construction workers : A segment of the poverty sector

R. RAMANUJAM

Professor of Economics,  
Dwaraka Doss Goverdhandoss Vaishnav College, Madras

Construction industry, for dwelling and for public purposes, has been from times immemorial an important employment creating activity. The construction of huge temples, churches and mosques in the earlier periods of history bears testimony to this fact. Further the artisans who specialised in these areas were covered, as it were, under a social security scheme, by state patronage. But the changes in economic environment today have made construction workers at various levels income-earning constituents of the labour force of the country. In this paper at this Institute, we are particularly concerned about the construction workers at the lower tiers, comprising skilled, semi-skilled and a large number of unskilled labourers who form an important part of the poverty sector. The main objective of planning, both at national and state level is to identify these groups whose welfare should be the main concern of all organised activity in the programme of poverty eradication.

### Data for the study

It must be admitted straight away that the author has not done any original research work on the subject

due to lack of time and facilities. On the other hand, fortunately the Department of Statistics, Government of Tamil Nadu, under Selvi Celine D'Souza's supervision brought out in 1978 a very detailed study of this problem. The conclusions of the study are based on a sample survey of 469 workers in the work spots of the Tamil Nadu Governmental building works, under the contractor system, in the city of Madras. May be it would be possible for the Institute to make a more thorough state-wide survey as a project to throw more light on varied aspects.

### Aspects of construction labour in Tamil Nadu

#### Significance of the workers :

1) The size of this sector including all types of construction workers in all the districts is given in Table I. A reading of the figures shows that the urban poorer section living in the congested slums comprise the largest number and migrants from the dry districts occupy the second place. According to the 1971 census, construction workers formed 1.3 per cent of the total work force in Tamil Nadu out of which 5 per cent

was from Madras City. These figures must have grown to higher levels now.

The significance of the construction workers can also be projected from another angle i. e. , the share of labour cost in construction costs. This has been split into two sections and out of 16.82 per cent labour cost, the total cost of construction is again divided between skilled and unskilled in the ratio of 62.24 : 37.76. The breakdown is given in Tables II and III.

#### *Characteristics :*

The following features of construction labour have been gleaned from the responses to personal enquiries conducted for the report of the Statistics Department referred to above.

- a) Table IV gives the age-wise and sex-wise distribution of these workers. The majority seem to be in the age groups 19-34 constituting nearly 56 per cent of the total. The older people (above 51 years) form only 2 per cent. In regard to the sex ratio it was found that the males outnumbered females.
- b) In regard to skill pattern it was found that below 18 years there are no skilled persons. They only learn by long years of apprenticeship in regular jobs. They become skilled by their 35th year and hence maximum skill is found in the age group above this. (Refer Table V)
- c) Dependency load : Most of the urban workers have a heavy dependency load. Of the rural workers only 5 per cent were free of the burden

of maintaining dependents. Besides those with them, they had to support others living elsewhere. (Refer Table VI)

- d) The extent of literacy is also given in the said report on the basis of the analysis. (Refer Table VII)
- e) Migrating nature : The lower levels of construction workers were drawn mainly from the districts. Table VIII gives the number of people who have migrated from different states and districts which throws ample light on the migrating character.

#### *Living conditions :*

The conditions under which these workers have to do their jobs is very strenuous and they need many facilities like shelters during the period of work, crèches, canteen facilities and so on. But actually none of these are provided in any work spot and they are living just like nomads of ancient times. If there is any road works, most of you would not have failed to see the entire labour just living right on the road side, cooking and sleeping in the open. There are many laws to require the contractor to provide all these facilities. But the lack of unionism and the scattered nature of the employment has put these laws into cold storage. (Refer labour laws and public works safety codes.) I.L.O. had also tried to evolve some measures in this direction.

#### *Wage rates :*

The Minimum Wages Act of 1948 fixes the wage rates that have to be



adhered to. According to the Act a committee of the State Government is expected to fix the wage rates with representation for employers and labourers. (Refer Table IX for wage rates).

The assessment of the conditions brings out clearly the need for organising them after a careful study and secure minimal welfare measure to improve their level of living.

TABLE : I

## Districtwise distribution of construction workers—Tamil Nadu

T : Total  
M : Male  
F : Female

State/District	Construction Workers	State/District	Construction Workers
1. Madras	T 33497 M 31067 F 2430	8. Nilgiris	T 4055 M 3189 F 866
2. Chengleput	T 16422 M 15143 F 1279	9. Madurai	T 17535 M 15001 F 2534
3. N. Arcot	T 14013 M 12515 F 1498	10. Tiruchirapalli	T 18818 M 15853 F 2965
4. S. Arcot	T 9456 M 8696 F 760	11. Thanjavur	T 13761 M 12687 F 1078
5. Dharmapuri	T 4798 M 4190 F 608	12. Ramanathapuram	T 11980 M 10788 F 1192
6. Salem	T 19594 M 16514 F 3080	13. Tirunelveli	T 15667 M 14187 F 1480
7. Coimbatore	T 44810 M 35665 F 9145	14. Kanayakumari	T 9829 M 9543 F 286
		15. Tamil Nadu	T 234235 M 205038 F 29197

TABLE : II

**Building cost composition among skilled workers**

Sl. No.	Category of workers	Per cent
1.	Brick layer	37.35
2.	Carpenter	33.70
3.	Painter	8.34
4.	Fitter	12.56
5.	Plumber	4.23
6.	Wireman & helper	3.82
	Total	100.00

Source : Research Study on Building Construction Labour—Department of Statistics—Tamil Nadu—1978.

TABLE : III

**Building cost composition among unskilled workers**

Sl. No.	Category of workers	Per cent
1.	Man Mazdoor	54.00
2.	Woman Mazdoor	46.00
	Total	100.00

TABLE : IV

## Distribution of the workers according to age and sex

Age ( Class interval )	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Less than 18 Years	33 (10)	9 (8)	42 (9)
19-34 Years	204 (58)	60 (50)	264 (56)
35-50 Years	105 (30)	47 (39)	152 (33)
51—and above	8 (2)	3 (3)	11 (2)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>350 (100)</b>	<b>119 (100)</b>	<b>469 (100)</b>

Note : Figures in brackets indicate percentage.

TABLE : V

## Distribution of workers according to age and skill

Age	Skill			Total
	Skilled	Semiskilled	Unskilled	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Less than 18 years	—	11 (35)	31 (13)	42 (9)
19-34 Years	126 (62)	20 (65)	118 (50)	264 (56)
35-50 Years	73 (36)	—	79 (34)	152 (33)
51 Years & above	4 (2)	—	7 (3)	11 (2)
<b>Total</b>	<b>203 (100)</b>	<b>31 (100)</b>	<b>235 (100)</b>	<b>469 (100)</b>

Note : Figures in brackets indicate percentage



TABLE : VI

**Marital status and number of dependents living with the workers**

Marital Status	Dependents living with workers			
	None	1-3	4 & more	Total
Married	18 (5)	132 (39)	191 (56)	341 (100)
Un-married	26 (23)	42 (36)	47 (41)	115 (100)
Others	3 (23)	8 (62)	2 (15)	13 (100)
Total	47 (10)	182 (39)	240 (51)	469 (100)

Note : Figures in brackets indicate percentage.

TABLE : VII

**Skill and literacy level of the workers**

Skill	Standard of literacy			
	Illiterate	Semiliterate	Literate	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1. Skilled	32 (16)	23 (11)	148 (73)	203 (100)
2. Semiskilled	3 (10)	8 (26)	20 (64)	31 (100)
3. Unskilled	122 (52)	28 (12)	85 (36)	225 (100)
Total	157 (33)	59 (13)	253 (54)	469 (100)

Note : Figures in brackets indicate percentage

Source : Report of the Department of Statistics—Construction Labour.

TABLE : VIII

Distribution of the workers according to the state/district of origin and sex

Place of origin (1)	Males (2)	Females (3)	Total (4)
Kerala	5 (100)	—	5 (100)
Andhra	4 (100)	—	4 (100)
Karnataka	1 (100)	—	1 (100)
Pondicherry	3 (60)	2 (40)	5 (100)
Others	3 (75)	1 (25)	4 (100)
Madras	85 (60)	56 (40)	141 (100)
Chengalpattu	65 (79)	17 (21)	82 (100)
North Arcot	47 (80)	12 (20)	59 (100)
South Arcot	39 (78)	11 (22)	50 (100)
Salem	25 (78)	7 (22)	32 (100)
Dharmapuri	—	—	—
Coimbatore	3 (100)	—	3 (100)
The Nilgiris	—	—	—
Thanjavur	18 (95)	1 (5)	19 (100)
Pudukottai	11 (91)	1 (9)	12 (100)
Tiruchirapalli	14 (74)	5 (26)	19 (100)
Madurai	9 (69)	4 (31)	13 (100)
Ramanathapuram	10 (91)	1 (9)	11 (100)
Tirunelveli	7 (88)	1 (12)	8 (100)
Kanyakumari	1 (100)	—	1 (100)
<b>Total</b>	<b>350 (75)</b>	<b>119 (25)</b>	<b>469 (100)</b>

Note : Figures in brackets indicate percentage.

TABLE : IX

## Rate of wages fixed by Government of Tamil Nadu in 1942

Class of employees	Grade	Rate of wages per day Rs.
Unskilled	Grade-I	1.80
	Adults	
	Grade-II	1.50
	Adults	
	Children	1.20
	Non adults	
Semi-skilled		2.75
Skilled		3.60



## Summary of Discussion

In presenting the paper "Construction workers: A segment of the poverty sector" at the seminar held on October 30, 1980, the author brought in some additional information not contained in the paper. This was based on a short survey of three colonies of construction workers living in Anna Nagar in Madras city. The survey revealed that these workers live on the pavements with the sky for a roof, and generally find work in any part of the city. They generally move to their work sites with their families. Wage levels range between Rs. 10 and Rs. 12 for semi-skilled workers and between Rs. 8 and Rs. 10 for unskilled ones. The *mestris* who are attached to the contractors usually contact the workers, and the wage is determined by mutual bargaining. Wages are usually paid a day in advance, so as to ensure that the worker does not go elsewhere upon the given day.

Most of the workers are migrants, and come from Salem and Ramanathapuram. During the monsoons, when construction activity comes to a standstill, the workers usually go back to their villages, returning to the town when work there is once again available. However, they appear to be in the process of conversion into a permanent workforce with no agricultural connections.

The migrant character of the workers implies that there is a two-point depen-

dency upon them: they have to maintain households in the city as well as in the countryside. The Obburuva community from Salem appears to provide the reservoir of migratory construction workers in the State.

The precarious and day-to-day life of these workers, the author argued, indicates that they belong to the poverty sector of the economy.

During the discussion, certain additional facts emerged. A participant pointed out that a Union—the *Tamil Nadu Kattida Thozhilalar Sangam*—does exist, and has in the last few months been conducting a campaign for housing facilities. The *Sangam* has organised workers along with their *mestris*, since the latter not only supervise, but also participate in the work process, and have essentially the same problem as the workers. Secondly, the basic cause underlying the migration from Salem and Ramanathapuram appears to be the dry character of these districts, according to a study conducted by the Xavier Institute of Social Services. However, this is not the sole explanatory factor. Migration also appears to be due to (a) the pattern of landholdings and concentration, and (b) the existence of public works under contract system within the district.

Within the group of construction workers, according to a participant, different castes follow different skills. This appears to be a well accepted phenomena within the industry; workers who have undergone training at the Government Training Institute set up for the purpose, have generally been left unemployed, because contractors feel that (a) they are not sufficiently trained, and (b) they are not capable of the strenuous work required.

In order to understand the problem of duration of employment, which is certainly not all-year, it is necessary, a participant pointed out, to examine the structure of the employment. There are essentially three types of employment—gang labour, the daily recruits and where the labourers team up with a mason and move with him. Gang labour is very cheap, and is paid about Rs. 3 to 4 per head as against a normal wage of Rs. 6. Gang labour often is found on road construction, dam sites, fertiliser plants, etc. A market place for daily recruits is usually found in each division. Those who find employment on a daily basis often run into the problem of non-receipt of wages. Payment is usually on a piece rate basis, and there is no contract. It is not possible to generalise on working conditions of local labour that teams up with a contractor. Employment in these

cases directly depends upon the size of the mason's clientele.

In response to a question, the point was made that laws safeguarding construction workers do not exist at the national level. Some laws with local application have been made in Delhi, and the Central Public Works Department has drawn up a set of model rules, but these are not enforceable. They are not implemented even in the public sector projects. In fact even the Minimum Wage Law is not observed in most cases.

The final aspect that was covered by the discussion was female participation in the industry. It was pointed out that the Census figures of 7 per cent for 1971 was a gross under estimation, the actual figure ranging anywhere between 35 to 40 per cent. As such, the table in the paper showing variations across districts would have to be taken with caution.

In closing it was suggested by the author that the construction and match industries in Tamil Nadu required further research.

The seminar was chaired by Dr. M. Srinivasan.