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**Migrant Workers in Informal Sector:**  
*A Probe into Working Conditions*

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## **Abstract**

The broad idea of the paper is to analyze the socio-economic status of the migrant labour in urban India. Through the field study, the paper examines if the migration of labour to an urban space has made any significant change in their living and working conditions, in particular labour market and human development related aspects. Moreover, we probe into the extent of informalization of work and its impact on working conditions. Further, we describe how these migrants explore the ways to cope with inevitable deprivations. Quite importantly, the process of migration is moderated by agents such as labour brokers. We make an attempt to unravel the role of labour brokers in this segment of labour market. Using a descriptive frame, based on observation, focused group discussion and in-depth interviews, we investigate working conditions of two types of migrant workers in Mumbai: (a) *naka* Workers (b) seasonal construction workers. Cues emerging from this study points out that these workers get higher wages in their current work than wages they would have earned in their region of origin. However, as viewed by these workers, they have been deprived of primary goods such as social security and sustained human development.

## 1. Introduction

According to Indian census data, rural to urban migration has shown a noticeable increase, especially since 1971. It is obvious that this flow has its share in burgeoning urban population in India. Further, since 1971 the proportion of workers in the agricultural sector has shown a decline, followed by a corresponding increase in the proportion of workers in the unorganized non-agricultural sector (Bhattacharya, 1996). Taking cues from the literature, due to increasing capital intensity in industrial production, the formal sector employment in urban India has grown at a very slow rate, showing a decline in recent times. Therefore, most of the migrants who come to work in the urban area are likely to be absorbed in informal work.

The core theme of this paper is to understand the nature of change migration has brought in workers life, especially working conditions. For that, based on field research conducted in Mumbai during August-October 2009, we explore the ways and strategies that migrants have adopted to survive against the backdrop of indecent work, without basic rights such as social security. This study covers two types of workers: *naka* workers and seasonal construction workers. “*Naka*”, a Marathi word, means a junction. *Naka* worker is a description for those workers who assemble in *nakas* in the morning, from 6 AM to 8 AM. These workers, mainly men, living in the vicinity or commutable distance wait in *nakas* until they get an offer for the work from a labour contractor, often covering work profiles such as mason, carpenter, plumber, helpers and so on. Second type of workers covered in this study –seasonal migrant workers- are sourced from states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh by labour contractors. These workers, once they are sourced for the work, come to the city, and, then, live in the worksite until the construction project completes. Once the project completes, they have two choices, either to join another project or to go back to the origin. It is important to note it is quite likely that a *naka* worker has origin in the state of Maharashtra, either Mumbai

or other districts in Maharashtra. On the other hand, most of construction workers originate from states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Our field research comprises of three methods: observation, focussed group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews. While FGDs were conducted only for *naka* workers, other two methods were used for both the groups. Due to the nature of work in construction sites, we could not conduct FGDs for construction workers. Our field research began with visits to *nakas* and construction sites. For *nakas*, following the visit, we observed the functioning of the *naka*. While we were observing, curious workers interacted with us, probing why we were there. We gave responses which, perhaps, answered their question. Sequel to this, we were engaged in in-depth interview about *naka*, their working conditions and so on. Interestingly, we interacted more in subsequent days. Our exchanges regarding *naka*'s functioning and their life evolved to the extent that they showed more interest in sharing their experiences and anguish. We came in contact with leaders of *naka* workers association "*Nirman Mazdoor Sangathan*", which is not affiliated to any political party. This union is a membership based organization. We visited three *nakas* in Mumbai: *Chembur naka*, *Sion naka* and *Bhandup naka*. Following our visit and in-depth interviews, we conducted three FGD separately for three *nakas* mentioned above in Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. We recorded these FGDs, which were transcribed to the content later. On an average, FGD comprised a group of 10 workers. However, we had a different strategy for construction workers. We visited eight construction sites. While, we visited two sites each in Bhandup, Belapur and Chembur, one site each was visited in Ghatkopar and Borivali. In total, we interviewed thirty six workers, spread across these sites. These migrant workers were working as helpers, masons, carpenters in different construction sites of Mumbai. We asked questions regarding rationale behind migrating; income; contractors; housing; education; and health (see Appendix).

We examine four issues that are related to rural-urban migration. First, factors that influences rural-urban migration of the labourers, who are likely to be absorbed in informal work. Second, we investigate issues related to human development of these workers. Third, we bring out the role of labour brokers. Fourth, we describe views shared by migrants regarding their livelihoods. The paper is organized as follows. Second section deals with the concept of migration and migrants who work as casual labourers in the urban area. Third section deals with the process of labour migration. It also discusses the characteristics of rural-urban migration in India. Section four discusses diverse issues related to social and economic circumstances of the *naka* workers. Section five discusses views shared by seasonal construction workers, captured from the transcribed content of in-depth interviews.

## **2. Understanding Migration**

This section brings out the basis of migration and the theory behind it. According to the National Sample Survey 62<sup>nd</sup> Round (NSS) among the total employed in the labour market self-employed (55.40 percent) are maximum in proportion followed by casual labour (29.80 percent). The National Sample Survey (NSS) defines a casual wage labourer as a person who is employed by others in farm or non-farm enterprises, both by household and non-household. In return, these workers receive wages according to the terms of the daily or periodic work contract (NSS 62<sup>nd</sup> Round Report, 2006). It is important to note that casual labour in India has three major characteristics. First, they do not have a regular job contract. Second, their wages are lower than other categories of employment such as regular employment and self employment. Third, they do not receive any social security benefit. Interestingly, migrants form a significant part of the casual labour market in India (Deshingkar and Farrington, 2006). These migrants migrate to cities mostly in search of livelihood opportunities. The most important pattern of migration that prevails for a developing country like India is rural to urban migration. Mass migration

to cities has become a part of the development process of regions, creating imbalance in development and growth among states and its inhabitants (Deshingkar, 2004).

The contribution of the migrant workforce to urban development is immense. In addition, the processes of liberalization, privatization, and globalization, especially since 1991, have enhanced the pace of internal migration of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers from rural to urban areas (Pattanaik, 2006). Nevertheless, the experience of developing countries including India reveals that the modern urban sector, especially better organized ones, due to its emphasis on capital intensive techniques in production may absorb partially the enormous growth of the urban workforce (Harris 2003) into an employment ensuring decent working conditions. On the other hand, a substantial part of the increased labour force, due to migration, in the modern sector is likely to be absorbed in the informal work in the unorganized sector where people create their own employment opportunities to the extent that their capital and skills permit. In a circumstance like this, people who join workforce often end up earning lower than the minimum wage (Kundu and Sarangi 2007).

To a greater extent, the exodus of casual labour from rural to urban, pertinently in developing countries such as India, may have its roots in ostensible dualities which exist in the economy. In the dual economy of developing regions, there are two sectors evolving together. There is the modern sector existing in urban regions where the patterns of living and working resemble the developed countries. On the other hand, there is the non-modern sector present either in rural regions or urban peripheries, which absorbs majority of workforce in the country, struggling to eke out means of survival and living in entrenched inequalities (Schumacher, 1973). Moreover, the majority of the population living in the non-modern sector has very limited opportunities which offer decent work. Their work opportunities are so

restricted that they cannot work their way out of misery. Their participation in labour market hinges around possibilities like underemployment and unemployment. When they locate occasional work, they may get low paid works with lesser chances of attaining their work potential. Obviously, those who are keen to get out of this loop may opt to migrate, often drifting to urban regions where they get work at higher wages.

This concept of modern (city) and non-modern sector (hinterland or rural area) goes back to the core-periphery model of Friedman (1973). John Friedman tried to explain that the concentration of economic power, technical progress and productive activity at core or in the modern sector helps to maintain the status of core and its domination over the periphery in terms of employment opportunities and social amenities. The domination extends to the degree that the hinterland people depend on the core for livelihood opportunities. The core becomes economically powerful and provides populace of the hinterland with some source of earning. Migrant labourers need work in the city due to the lack of proper employment opportunities in the rural areas. On the other hand, the development of the city to a greater extent depends on the services provided by the migrant workers, supplying labour at lower wage rate albeit these rates are higher than the wages in places of origin. The nature of contract of these migrant workers is informal, providing transitional form of living and livelihood for them. This transitional employment, though a solace for a migrant, is often enmeshed in miserable working conditions, engendering multiple deprivations. Nevertheless, the unorganized sector provides employment and livelihood to a huge segment of the labour force. The urban unorganized sector provides relatively easy access to various employment opportunities for deprived segments of the urban society as well as rural migrants. Concomitantly, the urban economic system copiously bank on such unorganized workers for the expansion and development. However, it is ironical that this segment of the labour market which provides vital services to the city also forms the lowest rung of the urban society (Shrivastava and Kumar, 2003).

### **3. Process of Labour Migration**

In trying to understand the process of migration, the section highlights the major characteristics of the rural to urban migration and also indicates its socio-economic aspects. Further, it examines the role of intermediaries in the migration such as labour contractors. The National Commission for Enterprises in the unorganized Sector (NCEUS) has observed that the trend of increasing short and long duration migration has an apparent link with regional inequalities. Mobility of labour takes place when workers in source areas lack appropriate options of employment and livelihood and there is expectation of improvement in standard of living through a continuous source of employment in the area where they intend to migrate, in terms of increased income and more participation in employment (Lall, Selod and Shalizi, 2006). The development process of the city provides people with new economic opportunities and also other social benefits which lead to migration of workforce to urban areas. However, the participation of these migrant workers in the organized sector employment, which provides decent working condition in the urban areas, has been abysmally low, partly explained by lack of educational attainment of rural youth, which is required to get job in the organized sector (Bino et al, 2008). Therefore, they tend to be absorbed in the informal sector which has grown over time, functioning as providers of essential services to the city although at very low returns (Shrivastava & Kumar, 2003).

It appears the development of informal sector in the city enhances the intensity of migration of unskilled workers to the urban areas. In an attempt to mitigate deprivation and make an adequate living for themselves, the people from poor households in rural areas keep moving and shifting their place of living to urban areas. They make a serious effort to diversify their livelihoods through a variety of informal sector job opportunities available in the urban areas



(Bhattacharya, 1998). In fact, the rural migrant labourer enters a situation of unlimited supply of labour from the rural areas to the expanding demand of labour in the urban informal market (Indrani Gupta and Arup Mitra, 2002).

The decision to migrate involves contextual factors such as push factors which force migrants out of rural areas and pull factors which attract migrants to urban areas (Indrani Gupta and Arup Mitra, 2002). Further, the close operation of the pull and push factors of migration become very pronounced due to the imbalance in the growth process of the different regions of the country. The surplus low skilled individuals, who do not find desirable employment profile with decent wage in the rural areas, get absorbed in the informal sector in the urban areas, donning the role of casual worker. In many instances, they work and stay in the urban area for a longer term. In other instances, they come to work during the season when there is no rain and agricultural activity is nil in their village and then return to their native place when there are rains. These people move to the urban region for a temporary period of time. The motive behind migrating to the city is to facilitate more earning than migrants would be able to within traditional primary economic activities (Deshingkar, 2004). In fact, temporary migration has become a routine part of the livelihood strategies of the rural poor. It is an important route to come out of poverty for the poor. Although income these migrants generate may help them to survive, there may be little scope for saving the investible surplus (Bhattacharya, 1998).

Further, the pull of informal sector work in urban areas is, to a greater extent, explained by the prevalence of low wages in rural areas. In most cases agricultural labour contracts are verbal, often not protecting workers from irregularity of employment and earning. It is important to note that low wage in primary activities such as agriculture, impacting the rural labour force, may be explained by both the micro phenomena like productivity, be it farm or individual, and macro ones such as institutions which enable the functioning of the product and labour market. For instance, a pervasive low wage rate, far

lower than minimum wage set by the state, may occur if low productivity, due to obsolete state of art, coexists with exploitative labour market scenarios, wherein labour market institutions such as law and collectives may suppress even increase in real wage, thus pushing workers into perpetual misery. Further, the nature of agriculture productivity is such that it depends on the vagaries of the monsoon and with it the employment scenario in the agriculture sector gets unstable (Harris 2003). In contrast to this, urban areas provide a lot of scope to diversify incomes through the various informal sector job opportunities.

There are certain traditional push factors which affect the rate of migration to a very significant extent. These are: drought in the rural area, low wages in the agricultural sector, lack of sustained sources of income and lack of diversified livelihood opportunities. Besides these there are also some new pull factors that have been operational in the last two decades and have given a momentum to population mobility. These are urbanization and the new economic opportunities arising from urbanization, improved communications and roads and substantial increase in remittances from migration. Overall, the process of urbanization has led to increase in remittances from rural-urban migration and it is gradually substituting the irregular and low wages of the agricultural sector (Priya Deshingkar, 2004).

The migrants primarily trace work in the informal sector in cities as they do not possess adequate skills that are required to get jobs in organized sector. This leads to the development of dual labour market in the urban areas. On one hand there are the scantily paid workers, not availing any form of social security in the informal sector, and in contrast there are the highly skilled and better paid formal sector workers. Although the migrants earn more in the urban areas than in the rural areas, since they are underpaid in the informal sector in the city it thrusts on them a low standard of living and quality of life in the metropolis.

Nevertheless, the impact of migration on the socio-economic condition of migrants can be varied. First, the migrants could get locked in the debt cycle where all their earnings are used up in repaying the loan they had incurred at home in the rural regions. Most of their remittance is also used in the funding their expensive working capital which is required in agriculture and performing other social and economic responsibilities in their village. Second, migration may not be capable of improving their social and economic condition to an immense extent but may help them to improve their survival strategies (Shrivastava and Kumar, 2003).

Social networking is a very important feature of labour migration in the informal sector as it impacts the movement of the rural labour force to the urban areas. The aspect of social networking is significant to comprehend the implications of labour mobility on the labour market trends. The migrants and the labour brokers form the set of connections which channelizes the movement of labour (Rees, 1966). The primary task that the labour brokers or contractors carry out is of selecting the migrants for work. They also decide on the mode and destination of travel in different parts of the country from the migrant's native place. There are contact points from where contractors or *mukkadams* procure the supply of labour. These contact points are best illustrated as the juncture points such as bus stands and railway stations. Since the migrants in the initial stage have little information of the labour market, its needs, structure and the process of functioning, the labour brokers in this aspect serve the purpose of bridging the gap between the market and the migrants. However, networking through brokers in most cases has proved to be exploitative. Against this backdrop of push-pull factors and labour brokers, very few rural to urban migrants enter employment or livelihood streams which provide decent living and working conditions. They tend to enter the migration streams which are niggardly in ensuring decent work and living because they get work at wage rates faintly higher than they would have

earned at home. On the whole, the discussion in this section indicates that migration is entrenched in diverse processes, structures and relations (Priya deshingar and Daniel Start, 2004).

#### **4. Socio-Economic Condition of Migrant Workers**

This section discusses the socio- economic aspects of migrant labourers with respect to their livelihoods, wages, working conditions. Cues from the literature show that the socio-economic condition of the migrant workers is far below the desirable level, due to migrants' transitional and informal nature of employment. In addition, lack of skill and educational attainment among migrants renders them to a vulnerable economic and social life in the city. Further, worker's volition seems to have very limited power in exploring opportunities in the labour market since their choices in this market are being subject to intermediary institutions such as labour brokers, often constraining these workers opportunities to avail a work with decent pay and social security.

The informal sector in the urban areas is characterized by low wages, excessively long hours of work and social security almost not existing. Since migrants earn less than what is required to sustain a decent living in urban areas, they lead a life of low quality, presumably reflected in their low human development. The migrants live in deplorable conditions and have extremely poor health status. The women migrants are the worst hit in such a scenario as they are paid lesser than their male counterparts and they do not enjoy basic health benefits like maternity leave and others. In addition, for migrants the tenure of work for industries like construction is very unpredictable which leave them with a sense of insecurity of income and work (Solanki, 2002).

Nevertheless, the employers in the informal sector may prefer migrant workers since it is easier to exploit migrants as they may have lesser information about the labour market of the destination area and are in extreme need of money.

The pay, time and duration of work can be flexibly molded by the employers as the migrant workers do not have much say in the scenario. The contractors take advantage of the migrant's economic necessity for their own benefit. The employers do not provide them anything more than minimum subsistence wages and along with that unacceptable working condition (Lall, Selod and Shalizi, 2006).

It is reported that the brokers make the migrant labourers work for 18-20 hours and then pay them minimally. Further, since there is no formal contract of work for the migrant labourers they may be dismissed from their job without a proper notice and also charged of negligence of work. Again, in many cases, it has been reported that these informal sector workers are often released from their job without being paid for their work. The broker allure the asset-less persons of the villages with lump sum amount of money as advance for their wages and afterwards takes this as an opportunity to bind them to the work for infinitely long period of time. This makes their payment for work negligible compared to the labour that is extracted from them (Bhattacharya, 1998). Again, the contractors also resort to giving migrant construction workers with tough deadlines of work in order to complete the construction project rapidly so as to reduce labour cost.

Although these middle men lure the rural labourers for work in the urban areas, they do not provide them with decent living conditions in the city. Yet again, with the minimal wages received by these workers it becomes difficult for them to procure basic facilities by themselves that are essential to survive in the city. This negatively impacts their socio-economic condition in the city to an immense extent. Scholars envisage this degree of informalisation of work as employers or capitalists attempt to shift the various risks associated with production such as financial loss, unexpected increase in production cost and so forth on the employees (Harris, 2003).

The rural urban labour markets are increasingly getting connected due to the need of urban informal sector for the development of the urban regions. The shift of rural labourers from farm activities to non-farm activities is a cumulative process, connecting the urban and rural labour markets. Nevertheless, the labour markets, instead of attaining desirable level of integration, tend to get stratified, in terms of the difference in skill possessed by the formal and informal sector workers owing to the lack of skill development and education opportunities among the informal sector workers (Shrivastava and Kumar, 2003).

### **5. A case of *naka* Migrant Workers**

We present the findings from the FGD and in-depth interviews with *naka* migrant labourers in Mumbai. The focused group discussions with *naka* migrant workers of Mumbai were initiated to gain understanding of the migrant's socio-economic status.

To begin with, it is important to understand the meaning of *naka*. *Naka* is an area or junction point from where informal labourers are picked by contractors for different types of work like carpentry, painting and plumbing. The people waiting in the *naka* areas to get picked up for work are migrant labourers. The *naka* is an area where the labourer comes because the concerned individual has been getting work, of long or short duration, from here. Further, in the *naka*, the only access to work is through the contractors. Labour is picked up by the contractors from the *naka* on a daily basis. It is important to note here that there is no relation or direct contact between the *naka* worker and the actual employer, resembling temporary staffing in modern firms. Therefore, the contractors work as mediators between the *naka* worker and the employer. However, there is a difference between the migrant labourer waiting for the work in the *naka* and the migrant labourer working on the construction site. The labourers working on the construction site are temporary/seasonal

migrant labourers while *naka* labourers tend to participate in the urban labour market for a longer duration. For instance, the labourers at Chembur *naka* have been based in Mumbai for more than 15 years. Moreover, they are not as 'footloose' as the recent migrants since they have their families in the city, having rented accommodation in urban slums and having their children enrolled in schools. For that reason they prefer getting work in and around Mumbai and are not keen on migrating to other areas. This is not the situation with the temporary migrants. The temporary migrants inquire about construction projects in different parts of the country from their contractor and move to these sites without much hesitation.

Further, FGDs with Chembur *naka* labourers, Sion *naka* labourers and Bhandup *naka* labourers revealed that most of the labourers were from rural Maharashtra. They belong to districts like Ahmed Nagar, Kartaj, Satara and Yavatmal. The remaining of them was from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The interesting point about the *naka* labourers is that there is no segmentation among them based on regional background of the migrant workers. The migrant labourers belonging to different states of the country integrate with each other very well.

*Naka* workers migrated to Mumbai as there was no work in villages, which would give them a regular earning. Some of them did own land but lack of irrigation facilities and other infrastructural support made this land not arable. This is one group who unlike the seasonal migrants who desire going back to their native place for doing something of their own in their villages, prefers settling down in the city. Interestingly, most of the *naka* labourers who were aware of the NREGA in the rural areas wanted a similar scheme for labour in the urban areas and would not want to move to rural areas to take advantage of this scheme.

The biggest challenge that the *naka* workers have to deal is the irregular availability of work. Responding to this issue, many workers stated that they were able to secure work for merely 10-12 days in a month. Most importantly, the *naka* workers have an informal understanding among themselves whereby they charge similar rates for work. In addition, there is a clear gender divide in employment and wages offered to the labourers in the *naka*. Most of the female labourers are able to get work only as helpers and are paid half the wage given to the male workers in the *naka*.

During the field research –FGD and in-depth interviews– a few workers were of view that the fresh batches of migrants who come to Mumbai on a seasonal basis are seen as a cheaper substitute to *naka* workers by labour contractors. Supposing there is lack of agreement between labour contractor and *naka* workers on wage or working conditions, instead of choosing the path of negotiation, as shared by *naka* workers, contractor decide on employing the seasonal labourers. Further, the contractors find it easy to exploit the seasonal labourers because they are new to the place and have no community bonding to the area. The construction industry in the city tends to absorb seasonal migrants more than the *naka* workers. Most of *naka* workers whom we interviewed expressed that in the construction industry they do not get regular employment. For instance, workers with adequate experience in occupational profiles such as painter, plumber, fitter, and mason may don the role of helper, doing odd jobs in households. Although those *naka* workers with some grounding in occupational profiles that require relevant skill set want to work in economic activity of their domain, they end up doing odd jobs which may not require their skill or knowledge, echoing a trace of underemployment. What account for this scenario? As expressed by *naka* workers during FGD and in-depth interview, they are not employed on a regular basis in the construction industry because they charge more than the seasonal migrant workers do. To illustrate it further, taking cues from our field notes, in the construction



industry a *naka* worker expects at least 130 rupees per day. On the contrary the same work is done by the temporary migrant for 100 rupees a day. On the whole it needs to be underlined that the dire need to get regular work in the city to sustain oneself is what coerces *naka* workers to work for low wages and also live in conditions where their social and economic rights are not fulfilled.

## **6. A Case of Seasonal Migrant Workers**

In this section, we probe into working conditions of seasonal migrant workers in the construction industry. It is important to note that there is a fundamental difference between *naka* workers and seasonal migrant workers. While the former are migrants of longer duration, the latter are seasonal migrants with no base in the city. Moreover, seasonal workers, due to their transitional life and foot loose nature, tend to face significantly different socio-economic circumstances than that of *naka* workers. Taking cues from this distinction, while assessing the case of seasonal migrant workers we not only examine work related issues but attempt to give a portrait of their living conditions by incorporating themes such as decision to migrate, wage, housing, education, and health.

Reflecting on decision to migrate, seasonal workers whom we interviewed view that the decision to migrate is taken either by the particular individual or the household. Further, the decision may have its base in factors such as discontent about opportunities in the place of origin and perceived opportunities at the place of destination, commonly referred to as push and pull factors in migration literature. Responding to our probing about push factors which prompted them to migrate, workers identified the following push factors: lack of job opportunities, lower agricultural wages, the large size of the families and the small size of the land holdings. Importantly, as viewed by

them, decision to migrate is more driven by push factors than by pull factors such as wage rate.

Further, we probed more about their perspectives about push factors. There were responses indicating that lack of any agricultural work in the village is a key reason for migrating to the city. Reflecting further about this, some respondents explained that agriculture is no longer a source of gainful livelihood, with a consistent income stream and regular engagement, since the land size under cultivation has become below the optimal size due to the fragmentation, causing consistent low yield and underemployment. Further, investments fail to generate enough return and agricultural produce that is adequate to sustain the entire family, due to the sub-optimal cultivable land. In some case, as expressed by respondents during in-depth interview, the proceeds generated from farming are just sufficient to feed the family but not to have a marketable surplus, making saving a distant dream. Narrating further about push factors, some workers observed that exogenous factors like climate have its share in their miseries, rooted unpredictable climate: for instance, vagaries of the monsoon. Some migrants observe that a prime reason of why agriculture remains a less gainful livelihood is lack of irrigation facility in the village, causing less than attainable cropping intensity. While most of these workers own land in the region of origin, a few do not possess any land. These landless workers also share similar views about push factors. Moreover, both these types –with land and without land- often source food and other essential goods from the market, when their food stock from the farming –donning the roles of farmer and worker. Sometimes, they are deprived of food and other basic goods during this time as they do not have money to pay. Perhaps, then time is ripe for choosing to migrate in search of a livelihood.

After migrating, these workers, after a formative period, may fit in different occupation profile, depending upon skills they acquire during the initial phase of work. In fact, wage rate varies with respect to occupational profile of

workers. While profiles such as like helper or *bandhni*<sup>1</sup> (one who helps in congregating materials of making the building and construction material) is paid less, relatively more skilled profiles like fitter, technician and mechanic is paid higher wages (Table 1). Quite obviously, skill matters in earning more wages. While probing these workers, they shared that skill formation take places during initial phase of work when someone joins the field as a novice, implying that learning happens through informal training such as learning from peers or the labour contractor rather than through formal vocational training streams.

Table: 1. Wage rates of seasonal migrant workers in the construction industry

Occupational Profile	Wage per day (in Indian Rupees)
Manual labour	120
Welder	150
Gas cutter	150
Carpenter	150
Height work	160
Fitter	180
Mechanic	180
Electrical	200

Source: Primary data

Further, these workers get wages for the stipulated 8 hours of work that they are supposed to complete. However, there is overtime for every hour of extra work they do. Also, there are instances that they receive a fraction of their wages in advance, perhaps, helping them to cope some contingencies. Further, in three construction sites, workers have been given a card, which needs to be signed daily by the contractor, affirming the attendance of the worker. This card is the proof that they have worked for the day, making them eligible for the wage.

<sup>1</sup> *Bandhni* is hindi word for helper.

It is important to note that all workers whom we interviewed send a part of their earning to their village. Interestingly, five respondents said that they are able to send half of their earning to the village. This transfer takes place through two modes: either through bank or relatives. As viewed by them, this money helps in running their household in the village. It is also important for meeting both contingencies like disease and drought and needs such as old age care, children's education and marriage.

It is quite likely that these remittances are definitely more than what would have been earned in their place of origin. Although the UNDP report on migration (2009) observes that remittances have the potential of helping migrants make investments in improving their economic life from a long term perspective, it is doubtful that this is applicable to foot loose workers like this, whose employment is transient in nature. The nature of footlooseness is quite apparent in most of these workers. Tracing back to their migration histories, most of them, before moving to the construction work, had a brief stint with small enterprises engaged in activities such as laundry services, garment units, power looms, and handloom units. These workers moved to construction sector primarily due to pull factors such as higher wage. However, there are factors such as closure enterprises which make them land in construction sites, most often intermediated through labour brokers.

Our enquiry brings forth an important issue: What happens to workers when they acquire experience in their work. A few workers we met, who are not green horns or novices, but personnel with skill set, though not manifest in educational attainment, which is tacit to them, have not been able to translate their knowledge into advantages such as noticeable premium in wage. Rather, sadly, these people, albeit earning a bit more than the new entrant, have to settle for the lowest rung of the occupational hierarchy. This situation calls for progressive strides aiming a social change, resulting these people would experience significant pay offs from their work.

As mentioned earlier the contractors are basically the provider of the workers<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the contractors are persons with whom the migrants are directly in contact with. The type of association the migrant has with the contractor defines the migrant's regular availability of work in the urban areas. The awareness of the contractor regarding construction projects in the city to a significant extent helps in ensuring easy access and availability of work to the migrant workers in the construction industry. This kind of connection is extremely beneficial for the migrants, when they have to move from one construction project to another. The contractor informs the labourer (particularly someone who is from his village or someone who has worked with him for many years) about the other projects going on in the city. The migrants also update the broker about whom they have worked for. It is through them that they get to know about the construction projects going on in the city.

The contractors help workers to avail certain basic facilities in the construction site like medicine, water, helmet and safety belt. The jhuggi which is made beside the construction site where the migrants live in the city in their employment period is provided by the builder through the contractor. Further, the contractor provides for any illness and disease that takes place in the construction site. Excluding that any illness that takes place outside the construction site the contractor does not bear the cost. Contractors also usually provide for a first aid box at the construction site. Only in few cases migrants report that their construction site does not have a first aid box and it is extremely difficult for them to work in such an environment because their nature of work is such that they get injured frequently. Contractors supply water facility for all purposes through water tankers in the work place and in the labour camp of the migrant construction workers.

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<sup>2</sup> Our interviews with a few contractors revealed that, typically, a labour contractor, who intermediates between builders and workers is a person who was a worker in the past, with roots in the village.

These migrants share mixed views about their relation with contractors. While a half reflects that they benefitted immensely from contractors, another half are of view that the relation with the contractor is exploitative in nature, often to the advantage of the contractor. Some of them mentioned that contractors have not been successful in procuring wages for them on time, interpreted as breach of trust by these workers. There are also instances such as contractors pay a lump-sum to the labourers and bind them to the work for an indefinite period of time. While narrating their experiences with labour contractors most of them pointed out that some labour contractors are in favour of engaging workers longer time at lower wage rate, closer to the Marxian view of capitalists' exploitation by extracting the surplus value generated by the proletariats.

A major problem faced by the migrants in the city is housing. The migrants mostly live in the *jhuggi*<sup>3</sup> near to the construction site, provided by the builder. The migrants viewed that these *jhuggis* are not conducive for a safe stay and a sense of insecurity prevails among them. Moreover, most of these labour camps do not have electricity facility which makes living in these labour camps extremely vulnerable. Further, the housing conditions of these migrants are awful as it leads them to a terrible health order due to the lack of protection from adversaries such as extreme climate, dust, and mosquitoes. Further, there are instances of making a group of workers stay in one tiny room, often without proper ventilation. The UNDP report on migration states that migration performs a crucial task of increasing the migrant's disposable income which facilitates financing of education of the children. Therefore school enrolment of migrant children increases due to increase in income from migration. However in the case of India the above is more relevant for migrants who have left their children and family back at their native place. In the interviews conducted on migrant construction workers, migrants stated that they preferred leaving their

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<sup>3</sup> *Jhuggi* is a hindi word for thatched tiny residential unit, without any sanitation facility.

families at their native place because the seasonal movement of the migrants impedes their children's education.

As seasonal migrants stay for a short period in the city they do not get their children admitted to any municipal school in the urban area. As an alternative if they leave their children in their village, then the remittances migrants send to their native place assists in continuing their children's education. Therefore, migrants prefer getting their families to the city only in dire economic conditions, when they want their family members to earn along with them from the construction project. Nevertheless, in situations when they do not find any elder person to look after their families in their absence in the village, then they consider it to be unsafe to leave their families back in their native place. As observed by some workers, they often suffer from illness like cold, fever, and cough, primarily due to the nature of occupation and living conditions. However, the employer does not bear the expenses incurred on treating such illnesses. However, employer bears the expenses of any injury that might occur in the construction site while working. Further, since the construction work frequently causes minor injuries due to its nature of work, the construction site usually has a first aid box. However a few respondent migrants reported the absence of first aid box in their work site.

Migrants narrated about circumstances which make them ill, in particular sanitation facilities. According to them, the lavatories they use are in very unhygienic condition, albeit their repeated requests to improve the hygiene. Sometime, these complaints are attended with an undue delay. Secondly, a very common health problem that these migrants face is that of malaria, emanating from mosquitoes. It is only when construction project is towards completion the mosquito problem reduces significantly. Hence, the migrants cite about the rampant spread of malaria among construction workers. Due to all these routine problems, the migrants spend around rupees 300 per month on treatment. This increases if they face any major health problem due to their

nature of work. Usually they go to the nearby hospital, run by the local administration, or health post when they are unwell. Importantly, absence of social security benefits creates physical and mental stress among the migrant workers and lead to their physical ailment (Pattanaik, 2009). Further, it cannot be denied that barriers to health services among the migrants arise due to financial constraints. With the minimal wages the migrants receive and with the frequency at which they fall ill due to their nature of work it is difficult for them to finance appropriate health care always. These migrants viewed that although they earn more in the city; their work in their native place is less strenuous, implying better health.

Most of the migrants have no other source of employment apart from their occupation in the construction sector. Their source of livelihood comes mainly from the construction industry. They mentioned that they have to starve if they do not work in the construction sector as labourers. However, many of them believe that if they get continuous work in the city their living conditions will improve. The purpose that regular source of income serves is that it aids in saving. Migrants aspire to invest this saving for some employment source at their native place at later stage of their life. Most of them cite that they want to work in the construction sector for a period of 5 to 6 years and then they want to return to their village to do something by themselves. However, currently if they have to go back to the village then they will be forced to starve as they have no work in the agricultural field. Nevertheless, a few of them suggested that they can think of earning in the city for a very prolonged period, provided they have proper secure place to stay. They disclose that secure shelter is significant in realizing their wellbeing.

## **7. Conclusion**

The rural to urban migration in India is pushed by measly employment generation in the sources of origin, emanating from a dilapidated rural



economic system that is rooted in agriculture. Going by facts, people who are part of the movement of rural to urban –be it short term or long term- are a disadvantaged lot, deeply entrenched in human development deficits and lack of rights needed for a decent living. In this recurrent struggle, they need to interact with complex labour market institutions such as brokers, who may don roles of both the harbinger of benefits as well as the epitome of exploitation. However, nature of misery, linked to work, varies for type of migrant worker. While migrants who have spent long duration in the city, albeit their poverty in terms of consumption, health and so on and uncertainty in getting employment, are less foot loose, perhaps, endowed with more stability in life, seasonal migrants who come to construction sites for work suffer from deprivations originating from both transience and human development deficit, though they enjoy regularity in earning.

The issue here is not to argue that who is a better off poor. Rather, substantive issue is to mitigate deprivation from lack of rights and human development deficits, by enacting proactive measures such as good working conditions and social security to these workers. Taking cues from the paper, relatively less skilled workforce, in particular those lacking either formal or informal training, flock to low-end occupations in the agriculture, construction, manufacturing and service sectors, often entailing work in miserable living and working conditions. Does this situation need interventions which may enable occupational mobility to workers who are keen to learn more and convert their tacit knowledge to marketable skills? Perhaps, answer lies in inclusive and open learning programmes, requiring appropriate models of public-private partnership.

Further, gains of rural to urban migration, as portrayed in this paper, is manifest in higher wages which these workers receive. However, it is important to set economic gains from wage against miserable working conditions. As shown in this paper, disadvantages from miserable working conditions may

crowd out economic gains. Therefore, generating well-being from migration entails better endowments of goods and rights to these workers. However, an important bill that was recently passed in Indian parliament, Unorganized Sector Workers' Social Security Bill, 2008, if enforced with valor, may stage a turn-around of the current situation, bringing significantly more well-being to these workers. The bill hopes to provide social security benefits to the vast majority of the informal sector workers in the country and would also serve as a platform for the informal workers to voice their opinion regarding improving their social security. Nevertheless, the bill still has to clearly mention the ways in which the social security would be provided to the informal workers and what would be the criteria to define the informal worker so as to make this available to all informal workers (Bino et al, 2009). Finally it is vital to point the role the village economy can play in sustaining the economic and social conditions of migrants.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire for in-depth interview

#### Demographic profile

Name of the person

Age of the person

From which place do you belong (state and district)?

How many years have you been working as a migrant labourer?

#### Work profile

What work do you do?

How many hours in a day do you work?

What are the timings of your work?

Where have you worked earlier as a migrant?

How many days in a month do you get work?

What is the wage rate that you are given at your current work?

Is this wage rate more than what you used to get at your native place?

Is there any resting place in your work place?

Is there proper drinking water facility at your work place?

Are there protection / safety facilities provided at the work place (gloves, shoes, helmets etc.)?

Do you get your wages at the right time?

Has there been an increase in the wages since you have joined work?

If yes, then when and how much was the increase

Do you have any other source of livelihood in the city or in your native place?

From whom did you get to know about this work in the city?

Did you learn the work from any one?

What are the major problems that you face at your work place?

What problems do you face with the kind of work that you do?

#### Rationale behind migration

What is the main reason for migration?

#### Condition of living

Do you possess any kind of asset in the city?

If yes, what kinds of asset do you possess?

Where do you live in the city?

Does your living place have proper sanitation facility?

From where do you procure water for daily use?

Have you migrated with your family in the city or have you migrated alone?

Do your children go to school?

To which hospital do you go when you fall ill?

What are the major problems that you face in living in the city?

#### Future

Do you want to go back to your native place to earn your livelihood?

How long do you plan to work in the city?

What are your long term plans about earning livelihood?

How do you evaluate your migration experience in the city?

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