

**Socio-Economic Condition of the Construction
Workers in Kanyakumari District**

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Introduction:

Economic progress is essentially the result of rational interaction between man and nature. The creative contributions facilitated by such productive functions depend greatly on many factors and parameters. Among them, labour has an energetic role to play. Labour, with its vast potentials leading to admirable advantages, is rightly regarded as capable of transforming and even reforming world economies over the years. As manual labour was overwhelmingly the most important factor in the generation of wealth, the labourers, artisans, servants and peasants who performed it were recognised to be the most valuable treasure of a country.¹ Labour economics is a popular branch of economics with theoretical validity and practical utility. As a logical extension, construction economics also has been thriving with useful insights. This branch of economics has gained strategic significance in due course as it reveals spectacular analytical strides. Construction economics consists of the application of the techniques and expertise of economics to the study of the construction firm and f process and the construction industry.

Building Construction:

The art of building constructions has been handed down through generations and it has followed set patterns. The extensive application of science and technology and the induction of cement concrete accelerated the pace and pattern of advancements in this direction. Construction sector is an important component in gross capital formation activity in the country's economy. It is a productive activity as it results in creation of assets. These assets will be further used for productive purposes. Therefore, construction should be regarded as "the Mother of Productive Activities" and it is inter-linked with most of the other sectors in an economy. Practically, all the sectors have construction components in them of varying degrees such as 40 per cent in transport and communications, 75 per cent in power, 80 per cent in irrigation and flood control to 100 percent in housing.² The middle East, India and China have traditions of city building that go back to 3000 years. It is also a valuable generator of tremendous markets for manufactures and suppliers of building materials and equipments. Sometimes it is also called an engine of growth.

Construction work in Recent Years:

In recent years, construction has emerged as a dynamic activity with immense employment potentials. Several types of male and female workers - skilled, semi skilled and unskilled- belonging to both urban and rural areas are employed in this sector. Construction work is physically hard and must be carried out in conditions which are difficult and hazardous. There are serious hazards of accidental injury and even death due to objects or persons falling

from height, collapse of scaffolding, caving in of earth work, handling of explosives and so on. Construction in recent years has emerged as a growing activity, the growth rate in labour absorption recorded by construction sector is almost thrice as large. It has been generating employment at a rate faster than the industrial sector and thereby manifesting its significance in the city's development.³ Construction work is one of the few industries that of common importance in all countries. Its role cuts across differences in resource endowments, social policies and existing levels of development. Some of the ancient civilizations had human settlements with well planned layouts and service facilities which we associate today with urban development. The government and trade unions have much scope to function in promoting the welfare of the construction workers. Economic development is accorded with due importance these days. Achievements and honours are influenced by inspiration and demonstration. Economic development, though an intricate process, is an indispensable area of human civilization.⁴ It carries a number of goals and targets. Such objectives have undergone radical changes in their stress and significance from time to time and place to place. A fast rate of growth of the economy, stable price and exchange rate, maximum employment, optimum welfare and economic equality or redistributive justice are the widely aspired goals of development. Eminent economists argue that liberation from poverty, inequality, unemployment, illiteracy and mass deprivation should be recognised as the grand goals of any development effort.

While they argue that the term 'development' itself is a developing concept, categorically establish that in essence development is a process of modernization coupled with social justice paving the way for the grand objective of ultimate realisation of humanization. Construction workers, as an integral constituent of the labour stock and supply, contribute considerably in the effort of realising these grand goals. The socio-economic features of construction workers will have to be analysed and assessed in the light of the above goals to have an objective insight into their realities.⁵ A positive examination of the parameters with a perspective outlook is bound to throw adequate light on the challenging issues relating to the construction workers. They can be expected to indicate the gap between the aspirations and the actuals and ideals and reals.

Providing Employment Opportunity:

In economic terms, the construction industry plays an important role through wide range of operations and projects. It contributes to the growth and development of virtually all other economic sectors. It provides for a significant source of direct employment, especially for semi-skilled or unskilled workers, through which a substantial part of 'the poor' men as well as women, are able to earn an income. It is a labour-intensive industry, in which standardization and mechanization are hindered by its project-wise nature. The main requirement of labour is of unskilled workers and they are usually recruited locally near about the place of work. The skilled workers in many cases do enjoy a fairly high degree of security of employment.⁶ The semi-skilled and non-skilled workers, however, have virtually no such security. In fact, since

the recruitment of the un-skilled workers is made by the sub-contractors or the labour contractors, the principal contractor assumes no responsibility about the continuity of their employment. The construction industry employs a large proportion of the civilian labour force in countries at all levels of economic and social development. Statistics for less developed countries are less accurate than those for industrialized countries; furthermore, they are not likely to cover the considerable construction activity that occurs in the subsistence sector of the economy.⁷

Self-Employment:

The phenomenon of self-employment in the construction industry appears to be widespread in both industrialised and developing countries. It also appears that the self-employed are frequently an extension of the production network of larger construction enterprises. A characteristic feature of employment in the construction industry is the constant moving from site to site, from job to job, and often from employer to employer. This mobility creates a number of problems for the workers concerned as well as for employers in the industry.⁸ In many developing countries casual employment is the main form of employment relationship in construction, and in many industrialised ones temporary construction workers are increasingly recruited through intermediaries. The dividing line between self-employment and wage labour is not always easily drawn, therefore, especially when the self-employed are themselves recruited under labour-only subcontracting arrangements. The Indian economy is centrally planned, but is of a mixed nature.

Contribution of Construction Works to Development:

Each economic sector makes its own contribution to the national welfare. Since construction forms a significant part of the general economy, many of the indicators of its development are simply particular facets of a more general phenomena, varying according to local conditions. Construction is a complex process, not for technological reasons but because of the great number of participants involved and the conflicts arising out of their differing requirements and attitudes.⁹ Construction workers number over two crores in India and 30 per cent of them are women and children. In a growing economy the building construction activity is thus bound to receive an important place in terms of investment also. In India, construction industry is one of the oldest organizations of human societies employing a large segment of unorganised workers.¹⁰ The growth of this industry is because of the growth of urban population leading to expansion of road, railways, river, dams which are made by manual workers and the most important being housing work. A specific branch of the economy may assume the role of a leading sector or a lagging burden or a balancing force. It depends on the nature and extent of contribution made to the gross domestic product (GDP) by the concerned branch of the economy. Although its share in providing employment is gradually decreasing, agriculture is still of prime importance, providing job opportunities to almost two-thirds of the country's workforce.

Construction Sector in Tamil Nadu:

Tamil Nadu is the southernmost State in the Indian sub-continent. It covers a little over 1,30,000 sq.km., representing about four per cent of India's geographical area. In the State of Tamil Nadu, there are more than 20 lakhs workers engaged in the activity of building construction next only to agriculture, the age-old construction industry, employs a larger number of workers in the unorganized sector.¹¹ The superb monuments found all over this country are symbols of a civilization built by blood and sweat of these toiling people. In 1998-99, Tamilnadu had a population of 55.1 million mining, quarrying, manufacturing, construction, electricity, gas and water absorb 17 per cent of the rural workforce, compared to the national average of 10.6 per cent.¹² There are several active types of big and small housing schemes. Low income group housing scheme, middle income group housing scheme, higher income group housing scheme, Tamil Nadu Government housing scheme, small industrial housing scheme, slum improvement housing scheme, special clearance housing scheme, special low cost housing scheme, rural housing scheme and police housing scheme are the various schemes in which the Government of Tamil Nadu has completed 178,920 houses during the period April 2001 to September 2010.¹³ Though ups and downs in the percentage levels were found the changes had been insignificantly small. It can be understood that the construction sector of Tamil Nadu has been showing strong symptoms of an upward march. With necessary training and care, the construction workers can upgrade themselves and excel those in other States.

Construction Workers in Kanyakumari District:

Kanyakumari district is one of the most vibrant and promising parts of Tamil Nadu economy. It is endowed with rich natural and human resources. The process of exploration and utilisation of resources towards higher optima has gained momentum a little belatedly. The necessary vigour and rigour are being added to such a process in recent year. Kanyakumari is one of the dynamic districts of South India.¹⁴ It has been accorded a place of prime importance among the districts of Tamil Nadu considering its vast socio-economic potentials of development and also its rich historical, social and cultural background. As found at the national and state levels, the construction activities in Kanyakumari district have been primitive and progressive. A considerably large section of the population of the district has been engaged in construction activities both on a full time and part time bases. The traditional and modern types of construction activities are found in Kanyakumari district which has already initiated the process of urbanization. Several types of construction activities like building of residential accommodation, administrative units and public utilities, construction of dams, river and canal banks, reservoirs and sanitation preserving projects, and provision of roads, bridges, drainages, parks and public amenities are being carried out periodically.¹⁵ The central and state governments have been adopting suitable policies and programmes as far the development of the secondary and tertiary sectors of this district are concerned. All these efforts have become possible in the light of the availability of the rich natural resources and the willing co-operation of the people in general.

Economic Condition of the Workers:

The socio-economic conditions of these workers do not seem to be bright at all places and levels. They have prospects and problems. Shelter is a significant branch of the economy next only to food and clothing. It enjoys basic significance in all welfare states. Naturally, the construction workers who constitute a vital input in the industry play a unique role. The construction workers have been consistently assuming added importance in all modern economies over the years.¹⁶ As a key branch of the service sector, construction activity has been accorded with considerable importance and preferential priority in developing economies as well. The provision of shelter depends mostly on the exertion of energy both mentally and physically by men and women. The skills of construction workers are able to influence the trend of economic upliftment itself. Generally, the term 'construction workers' refers to skilled, semi-skilled and un-skilled workers who discharge physical work in the construction of several types of buildings such as houses, apartments, business centres, items of public utility like schools, hospitals, libraries, bridges, roads and also several types of administrative conveniences.¹⁷ It excludes professionals like engineers, designers and contractors. Construction workers are essentially wage earners. Apart from the skilled categories, these workers are commonly classified by the nature of contract of their services as contractual labour or casual labour or hired workers. The labour contract can be broadly classified as (i) contract for a period and (ii) contract for a specific piece of work. The workers on period contract attach themselves to well establish building contractors and that ensures continuity of employment.¹⁸ The piece-wise contract workers and casual workers do not have any such guarantee and suffer

many days of unemployment. They are not able to take up works directly. There are masteries (a sort of employment brokers) who arrange jobs for them for a charge. The contractors and masteries have market power to determine wages, by their control over avenues of jobs. Thus, there is much room for exploitation of construction workers, especially those who are unskilled and un-organised.¹⁹ The very nature of the work allows little scope for organisation of these workers.

Therefore, trade unions are small in number and weak in nature. The work is not standardized and that make implementation of the minimum Wages Act very difficult. The construction workers reveal certain other features also. For example, they work hard but their bargaining capacity is low. Moreover, they are highly migratory in character.²⁰ So, the strengthening of interpersonal and intra-personal relationship has been frequently halted. Again, a high degree of inadequacy is found in the implementation of welfare schemes. The construction workers are confronted with a number of major and minor problems. The seasonal variations in construction activities like the rainy season affect their activities considerably. Consequently, several spells of unemployment occur. The rate of inflation and high cost of construction materials, distribution bottlenecks due to such causes as lorry strikes or other social unrests disturb work and several days of work and income are lost. As wage income is the main source of living of the construction workers, loss of work days and wages compel the workers to borrow for consumption purposes and that leaves a heavy burden of indebtedness.²¹ The resultant debt-trap is another cause for exploitation, reducing the unorganised workers to

the level of bonded labour. Yet another problem is the inbuilt risk involved in the work. Construction workers are often exposed to the risk of injuries and even death at times because there is no standardized protective measures for the jobs involving risk such as, construction at high elevations and pollutions by dust and poisonous gases. The cruel touch of poverty is not uncommon among certain types of construction workers.²² In addition to the common discrimination, found in wages paid to male and female workers, the latter are exploited physically also. Technically speaking, the market for construction workers is imperfect, discriminated, differentiated and exploitative in character. It is more favourable to the employers and middlemen than to the workers.

Conclusion:

The Government of Tamil Nadu prescribed a few safety measures and group insurance scheme; but they find little use in practice. Hence, a thorough study of the working and living conditions of construction workers will be useful to bring to light several problems faced by them and suitable remedial measures. Such studies may suggest specific steps to 'organising' construction workers for collective bargaining and self help. It must be possible to identify the areas where government policies may help those socially and economically backward sections of the society, through training, organisation, minimum wages, safety regulations and security of job.

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