

Children on construction sites

India is changing and modernizing quickly, urbanization being the most visible aspect. New infrastructures are being built on a mass scale; malls and high-rise buildings are springing up overnight. The whole construction industry is at its boom. "But that boom is on the backs of the poor and lower castes who are building this new India," said Mridula Bajaj, former executive director of the NGO Mobile Creches.¹

Expanding and fast growing construction sector and, in general, lack of greater employment opportunity elsewhere has drawn large number of workers in this sector. According to Mobile Creches, approximately 35 million men and women work in this sector and they are entirely unorganised. In Mumbai alone, approximately one million men and women work in this sector.²

I. Main characteristics of the construction workers

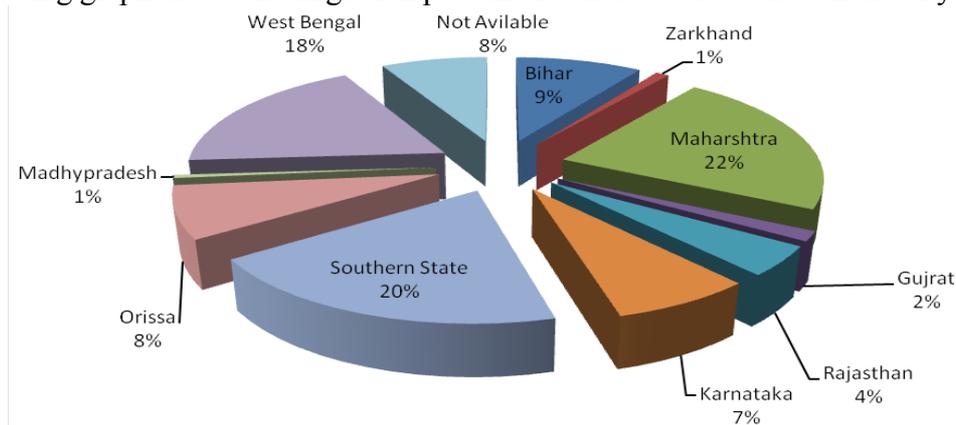
A.A nomadic population

"The construction industry is the single largest employer of migrant laborers, the poorest of the poor, in Indian cities"³

Million of unskilled porters, bricklayers and other low-caste laborers have left their native villages to escape extreme rural poverty and find a job in big cities. These migrant workers are spread across the country and travel from one area of work to another along with their families. They live in temporary settlements, sometimes provided by the construction company, for the duration of the construction project and then move to another site.

They usually belong to the poorest section of the population and most of them are illiterate. Being migrants, they don't get registered and hence are denied basic governmental facilities

The following graph shows the migration pattern of construction workers in the city of Thane⁴:



¹ Source: Washington Post, As the New India Rises, So Do Slums Of Laborers, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

² Source: Mumbai Mobile Crèches, <http://www.karmayog.com/ngos/mobile.htm>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Graph based on a survey conducted by Pratham – 1020 workers interviewed

B.Hard living and working conditions

Few laws govern India's construction industry and the lives of construction workers are characterized by insecurity of wages, dangerous working conditions, and lack of access to any kind of welfare. Leave facilities are hardly ever available for the construction workers and holiday policy are rare. The working hours of the construction laborers varied considerably but most of them work as much as 8 to 11 hour a day.

1.Insecure and underpaid jobs

Construction workers are unskilled and illiterate workers, which make them very vulnerable to exploitation. Being part of an unorganized and fragmented sector their bargaining power is low and they can't easily fight against injustice.

They are often not paid minimum wages and even the agreed wages are not paid in time. Moreover, their working time and hours are not well regulated and they do not get paid when they work overtime.

Majority of the construction workers earn between 50 and 100/- Rs a day. The daily wages of a woman construction worker are about 60/- Rs⁵. In Thane, most of the workers are working on monthly wages and have an average monthly income of 4010/- Rs. 296 workers are working on daily wages and earn on average 192/- Rs.

2.Hazardous working conditions

The working conditions and the facilities provided at the sites are far from satisfactory. Most of the companies do not even provide safety belts, protection eye wears, hand gloves, shoes or helmets to their workers.

India has the world's highest accident rate among construction workers, according to recent study by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) that cited one survey by a local aid group showing that 165 out of every 1,000 workers are injured on the job.⁶

Moreover the companies are not ready to compensate employee's having injuries who are not covered by life insurance. In case of accident, there is, in general, no provision for financial and medical aid. It is up to the workers themselves to arrange for the treatment.



3.Lack of basic amenities

The living conditions are no way better than the working conditions. Construction workers live with their family in temporary shelters built on the construction site. They live in tents built out of rubber and metal sheets.

Most of the time the construction companies do not provide any electricity or sanitation facility. The majority of the sites neither have toilets nor bathroom facilities and drinking water

⁵ Source: Mumbai Mobile Crèches, <http://www.karmayog.com/ngos/mobile.htm>

⁶ Source: Washington Post, As the New India Rises, So Do Slums Of Laborers, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

is often not available.

II.Children of the construction workers

The children including infants of these workers – estimated to be around 54 million⁷ – are even more vulnerable.

A.Health problems

The children living on construction sites often suffer from malnutrition, under nourishment, accidents, and innumerable health problems. According to a Mobile Creches's study, about 70 per cent of children living on construction sites suffer from malnutrition, compared with the national average of 21 per cent.

The study also pointed out that in the absence of clean drinking water and flush latrines, cholera and other diseases spread quickly and many people suffer coughs caused by inhaled paint fumes and cement particles.

B.No crèche facility on the construction sites

There is no system at all to take care of these children at work site despite the “Building and other construction workers (regulation of employment and conditions of service) Act, 1996, that stipulates that if more than fifty female workers are employed, rooms should be provided for the use of their children.

According to the Act, these rooms are supposed to be suitably large, well lit and ventilated, clean and sanitary and under the charge of women trained to care for young children but builders find various lacunae to get around these requirements.

Because of their family's extreme poverty and also since their parents are constantly working – sometimes mothers go back to work a few hours after delivery – small children are left to fend for themselves and are wandering around the site all day long.

C.High rate of illiteracy

Most of the children on construction sites are out of school children. They either stay at home or loiter around the construction site.

Different factors explain this high rate of dropout children, migration being the most important one. Indeed, the families frequently move from one place to another, making it difficult for the children to attend school regularly. Some children were enrolled in their village's school but were forced to drop out when moving to the city.

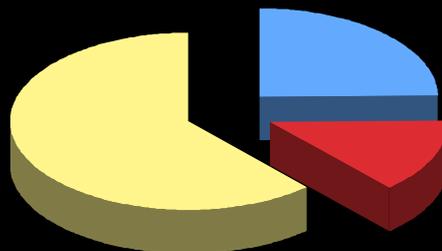
The lack of willingness to send their children to school is another factor. According to a survey conducted by Pratham in the city of Thane, accessibility of school does not seem to be a major issue.

The following tables show the education status of the construction workers' children in the city of Thane:

⁷ Source: Mumbai Mobile Crèches, <http://www.karmayog.com/ngos/mobile.htm>

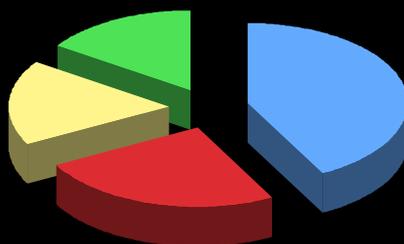
Age group	In Pre Schooling	Grand
3 to 5		
Total		

Age group: 3 to 5



Age group	In Pre Schooling	Grand
6 to 14		
Total		

Age group: 6 to 14



III. Pratha

In 2007, Pratha ... et children.

⁸ NIPS = Not in Pre Schooling

⁹ NBS = Never been to school

¹⁰ DOS = Drop out from school

¹¹ 1 six year girl and 5 seven year girl are going to Anganwadi because of non availability of school.

The objective of this program is to make Thane a street children free zone and mainstream the children into the educational net.

Pratham's staff identified 7 "pockets" where the majority of the children lived and decided to start its classes in these places. Two of these areas are temporary settlements of jopris for families working on construction sites: Upawan and Vasant Vihar.

22 families from Hyderabad, of which 39 children, are living in Upawan. The parents go to work everyday, earning 500 rupees a day, while the children are waiting for them in the pocket. The eldest take care of their younger siblings.

In Vasant Vihar Pratham listed 19 families and 36 children coming from different parts of the country (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh...) All the families are working on the same construction project (Sidhanchal project) and living near the construction site.

In these two areas, Pratham provided 80 children with educational opportunities and mainstreamed some of them into school.

A. Bringing education to the construction workers' children

The Pratham team first conducted a survey in the areas to identify the children and collect data (name, age, situation of the family, daily income).

Then Pratham's teachers approached the families, organized parents meeting and proposed them to conduct classes for the children a few hours a day.

When the parents agreed, Pratham's teachers started daily hobby classes in the pocket. These classes, which consist of games, poems, songs, drawing or story telling, allowed the children to become familiar with the educational environment.



A hobby class in Upawan

After a few months, the teachers started basic educational activities: holding a pen, drawing basic forms on a sheet of paper. Indeed, most of the children had never been to school before and had to start from the very beginning.

Over the months, the teachers started teaching the alphabet and the basics of writing and counting.

B. Mainstreaming these children to formal school

By organizing classes in the pockets Pratham managed to gain the parents' confidence and give the children a taste for learning. The next step was to mainstream these children into municipal

schools and then prevent them from dropping-out.

	Number of children enrolled in municipal school
Vasant Vihar	6
Upawan	5

1.Convincing the parents and the school principals

To begin with, the teachers needed to convince the parents of the importance of sending their children to school. They organized regular meetings with the parents to try to convince them.

During the four-hour class the teachers were spending at least one hour with the parents to explain them what their children were doing, what progress they made, which difficulties they could have. During these sessions, the teachers also spoke about the children's future and the opportunities school can create for them. Most of the parents understood the importance of school and said they wanted their children to be given an education.

Once Pratham had won the parents over, the main issue was to convince the school principal to enrol street children into school. Indeed, these children often suffer from a bad reputation and the school principal can fear the other parents' reaction.

But despite these difficulties, Pratham's teacher eventually managed to enrol 11 children in municipal school.

2.Supporting the children in school

Once in school, the children continue to receive Pratham's support. For example, Pratham offered every enrolled child a full school set comprising of a school uniform, a schoolbag, a pair of chappals, a pencil case and a lunch box. Pratham also conduct support classes to help the children meet the school requirements so no child is left out.

Pratham's teachers also follow the children's results and attendance very closely and meet their schoolteachers every week.

C.Some difficulties when dealing with construction workers' children in Thane

1.The lack of facility for the under 5 year olds

Children of construction workers often have to take care of their younger siblings while their parents are at work. Going to school regularly is therefore difficult and one child had to drop out from school for that reason.

Solution > Providing facilities (balwadis) for the under five year olds would allow a greater number of children to attend school. These balwadi classes could be held in the pockets or in the temporary shelter Pratham is willing to set up in Thane.
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2.Nomadic populations

Most of the families come to Thane to earn a living and then return to their village during the monsoon season. Moreover, the construction workers frequently move from one construction site to another. Most of the children are enrolled in their village's school but have to drop out to follow their parents in Thane.

Solution > The construction of a temporary shelter would provide for the needs of these children. The children would have the possibility to live in the shelter while their parents are away and return with them once they are back in Thane.

With this temporary shelter, the children would be able to spend the whole academic year in Thane and attend school regularly.

IV.Looking forward

- In other cities, Pratham is replicating this project and experiencing new models to better address the needs of the construction workers' children and attract them into the educational net.
- Young children being the more vulnerable, Pratham is focusing its action on providing facilities for under five year olds (crèches).
- Pratham is also advocating for the rights of the construction workers and pressuring the governments and the different stakeholders to improve their working and living conditions.
- To have a more effective impact, Pratham is working with a network of different NGOs involved in construction issues (for example Mumbai Mobile Creches)