



Migrant Labour in South India: Assessing Training, Wages, Well-being and Employment Security in the Construction Sector of Chennai

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Abstract

In the 21st century, migrant workers are playing a vital role around the world. Especially construction migrant workers in Asian countries like Malaysia and Singapore, where there is a high labour shortage for construction workers. Tamil Nadu is a labour-intensive state, but wages paid to local construction workers are high, and working hours are low. This is the main reason builders and contractors prefer construction workers from other states of India. Due to the backwardness of migrant construction workers family situation, workers are compelled to search for jobs in other states. Workers are looking for jobs, but they are not considering minimum wages and working hours in the construction sector. As per the state planning commission of Tamilnadu; The commission conducted study with 811 respondents for the report. It is revealed that majority of the migrant workers into the Chennai region are from the eastern and north-eastern region of India, in particular, from the states of Bihar, Odisha and Assam. They belong to the most backward sections of the society: 29 % belong to the Scheduled Tribes, 24% belong to the Scheduled Castes and 38% are from Other Backward Classes (OBC). The educational status of the majority of migrant workers is high school or below. The migrant workers are not very young and their average age is 32 years and two-thirds of them are married. They are also not considering accommodation, food, and sanitation. To look into this, the study was conducted to assess training, wages, well-being, and employment security in the construction sector of Chennai. The study adopted both primary and secondary data. The study found that the majority of construction workers migrated from Bihar to Chennai. A majority, that is, 53 percent of the respondents, had no formal education in the study area. The remaining 45.8 percent of the respondents studied up to primary education, and 1.2 percent that is, one respondent alone studied up to secondary education in the study area. It is noted from the respondents that there is no accessibility to schools in their native place, and they inferred that poverty is the main reason for not being able to access education. The study also recommended suitable policy measures to the government.

Key Words: Construction, Migrant Workers, Chennai,



Introduction

In the 21st century, migrant workers are playing a vital role around the world. Satteva Knowledge Institute (2023) stated that there are 140 million migrant workers in India. The majority of these workers have migrated from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Migrant workers contribute 10 percent of India's GDP (Aditya Taur, 2024). As per National Herald on 06.08.2025, Tamil Nadu has officially registered 12.17 lakh migrant workers, with the highest numbers in Chennai, followed by Tirupur, Kancheepuram, and Coimbatore. Migrant construction workers receive lower wages compared to local workers. They work under contractors, with long working hours and living conditions that lack basic facilities. In the informal sector, there is high demand for construction workers across the world. The same condition applies to India, including Tamil Nadu. There is no formal training provided to migrant workers in the construction industry. The well-being of construction workers in Tamil Nadu, especially in Chennai, is low, and safety measures are also inadequate. Hence, the study focuses on assessing training, wages, well-being, and employment security in the construction sector of Chennai.

Review of Literature

Kuldeepsingh Rajput, Manoj Jatav (2022): Migrant urban youth from rural areas have remained a relatively disadvantaged group in terms of access to social security and secure employment; they are primarily concentrated in the urban economy as informal workers. Migrant workers are often exposed to various vulnerabilities. This situation is further exacerbated by the very centralized and overwhelmed basic resources and services in the country, and poor living regulatory frameworks in India (2018 WHO). Migrant construction workers receive monthly wages, and the majority of them have a monthly income of up to Rs.10,000 on average. The study identified that construction workers migrated from other states at ages 19 to 25 years. Temporary migrants migrating with their families are found to be higher. Among the migrant construction workers, those within the age group of 26 to 35 years migrate more than others. A sizeable 94 percent of the respondents belong to the male category; most of the people working as construction labourers are married. **(Srinivasan, Praba Lama et al., 2024)** Migrant construction workers in Karnataka, India face financial, cognitive, structural barriers, and distrust in public health care services as obstacles to accessing health care. **(Santalati M. et al., 2020)** Migrant construction workers experience a 2.2% higher severity of safety accidents compared to non-migrant workers, with significant factors differing. **(Kim, J., Son, K., Yum, S., & Ahn, S., 2020)** Migrant construction workers face challenges such as increased use of subcontractors, dilution of safety standards, pressure to breach regulations, and cultural differences in safety attitudes and training. **(Shepherd, R., Lorente, L., Vignoli, M., Nielsen, K., & Peiró, J., 2021)** Safety training for migrant construction workers needs improvement, with a focus on active participation and consideration of context, labor market conditions, social relations, and cultural differences. Chinese migrant construction workers in New Zealand are generally satisfied with their jobs, but loneliness decreases satisfaction, with remuneration and opportunities for knowledge advancement being key determinants. **(Rotimi, F., Rotimi, J., et al., 2020)**

Research Gap

Many studies have been conducted on construction workers and migrant construction workers, both globally and in India. However, there is no intensive study on migrant construction



workers in South India that assesses training, wages, well-being, and employment security. To fill this gap, the study intensively focuses on these segments in Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu.

Statement of the Problem

Tamil Nadu is a developed State in India, where a wide variety of industries are found. Migrating from one place to another to earn money is not a new phenomenon; it has a long history. Migrating with family members within the state is not a problem at all. But migrating to another state is considerably tough because there are language barriers, different cultures, climate conditions, and food difficulties as well. Particularly, migrant construction workers face significantly high levels of problems. They work long hours 12 to 14 hours per day. Their living places are not good, and accessing basic needs at their workplace and living areas is difficult. Hence, the study focuses on migrant construction workers in Chennai.

Profile of the Study Area

Chennai, formerly Madras, is the capital of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Located on the Coromandel Coast near the Bay of Bengal, Chennai is the largest commercial and industrial center of South India, as well as a cultural, economic, and educational hub. It is also known as the “Detroit of India” due to its thriving automotive industry. Chennai's 2025 population is now estimated at 12,336,000. In 1950, the population of Chennai was 1,491,290. Chennai has grown by 282,300 in the last year, which represents a 2.34% annual change. These population estimates and projections come from the latest revision of the UN World Urbanization Prospects. These estimates represent the urban agglomeration of Chennai, which typically includes Chennai's population in addition to adjacent suburban areas.

Research Questions

- ✓ What are the socio-economic characteristics of migrant construction workers in Chennai, Tamil Nadu?
- ✓ What are the causes of migration and the problems faced by migrant workers at their workplace and living place in Chennai?

Objectives of the Study

- ✓ To find out the occupational hazards faced by migrant construction workers in Chennai.
- ✓ To analyse the working conditions and living conditions of migrant construction workers in Chennai.
- ✓ To assess the training and well-being of the migrant construction workers in Chennai.

Research Methodology

Sources of Data:

The sources of data were based on both primary and secondary sources. However, the study mainly depended on primary data. Primary data were collected through a well-structured interview schedule. Secondary data were collected from migration report surveys, and also from books, journals, magazines, reports, and relevant websites.



Sample Design and Sample Size:

The study area consisted of Chennai city in Tamil Nadu. The study focused on migrant construction workers in Chennai. To fulfill the objective of the study and to understand the ground reality of the construction migrant workers, a structured interview schedule was prepared, and data were collected from four sites. Since the population was unknown, the sample size was purposively selected and limited to 83 samples in the study area. Collected sample data were entered into SPSS, and simple percentage analysis was used for the study.

Definitions of Migration

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), economic migrants are differentiated from labour migrants. It defines several subgroups of migrant workers, including business travellers, contract migrant workers, established migrant workers, highly skilled migrant workers, immigrating investors, project-tied workers, seasonal migrant workers, and temporary migrant workers.

“Labour migrants are defined as those who move for the purpose of employment.”

- Economic migrants form a potentially broader group that includes people entering a state to perform economic activities, such as investors or business travellers, but can also be understood in a narrower sense similar to the category of labour migrants.

“A migrant worker is defined in the International Labour Organization (ILO) instruments as a person who migrates from one country to another (or who has migrated from one country to another) with a view to being employed other than on his own account, and includes any person regularly admitted as a migrant for employment.”

“The United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families defines a migrant worker as a person who is to be engaged, is engaged, or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a citizen”

“The United Nations Population Division defines irregular migrants (or undocumented migrants) as individuals who enter a country, often in search of employment, without the required documents or permits, or who overstay the authorized length of stay in the country.”

Migrant Workers in Tamil Nadu 2024-2025

As per the state planning commission of Tamilnadu; The commission conducted study with 811 respondents for the report. It is revealed that majority of the migrant workers into the Chennai region are from the eastern and north-eastern region of India, in particular, from the states of Bihar, Odisha and Assam. They belong to the most backward sections of the society: 29 % belong to the Scheduled Tribes, 24% belong to the Scheduled Castes and 38% are from Other Backward Classes (OBC). The educational status of the majority of migrant workers is high school or below. The migrant workers are not very young and their average age is 32 years and two-thirds of them are married. Not only is the social status of the bulk of the migrant workers is low but their economic status is also very low: a majority of migrants own no land at all or own a very small area of less than



one acre in their places of origin; nearly 40% of all migrants into Chennai region do not own a house in their place of origin; nearly one fourth of migrants do not have electricity while three fourths do not have access to toilets in their homes at their place of origin.

In the Chennai region, more than half the migrants have found employment in the manufacturing sector while the service sector and the construction sector has given employment for 29% and 15% of migrant workers respectively. Nearly one fourth of migrant workers who are employed in the Chennai region have not been working in their place of origin. In the Chennai region these workers have found employment largely in the service sector followed by the construction sector. A vast majority of the migrant workers, 84%, are employed without any kind of written contract. This practice is especially true of the manufacturing and service sectors while in the construction sector the prevalent practice is to have a group contact through a leader. Migrant workers are mostly unskilled when they come seeking work to Chennai region and they begin as helpers to skilled workers and learn the skill during the course of their work. 71% of migrant workers report of learning the skill on the job. On an average the monthly earnings of a migrant worker in Chennai region in 2024 is Rs.15902. This is marginally higher than the income required for a family of four to remain above the poverty line which is estimated to be Rs.14556/ month. 76% of migrant workers are either below the poverty line or earn just enough to remain slightly above the poverty line. The highest average income is earned by a migrant worker in the construction sector (Rs.18696/month), followed by the service (Rs.17025/month) and the manufacturing sectors (Rs. 14534/month). On an average, 3 out of 4 migrant workers earn an average monthly income below Rs.18000 in the Chennai region, in 2024.

Primary Data Results and Discussion on Migrant Construction Workers in Chennai

Table No: 1 -Age group of the Respondents

| S.No | Age Group | Respondents | Percent |
|------|-----------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | 18-25 | 3 | 3.6 |
| 2 | 26-35 | 10 | 12.0 |
| 3 | 36-45 | 67 | 80.7 |
| 4 | ABOVE 45 | 3 | 3.6 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 |

Source: Primary Data

The above table infers that the majority 80.7 percent of the construction workers belong to the age group of 36–45. Twelve percent of the respondents belong to the age group of 26–35, and the remaining 3.6 percent each are from the age groups of 18–25 and above 45. It is noted that the majority of the migrant construction workers in the study area belong to the 36–45 age group.



Table No: 2- Education Level of The Migrant Construction Workers

| S.No | Particulars | Respondents | Percent |
|------|---------------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | No Formal Education | 44 | 53.0 |
| 2 | Primary | 38 | 45.8 |
| 3 | Secondary | 1 | 1.2 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 |

Source: Primary Data

Table No. 2 shows the education level of the migrant construction workers. A majority, that is, 53 percent of the respondents, had no formal education in the study area. The remaining 45.8 percent of the respondents studied up to primary education, and 1.2 percent that is, one respondent alone studied up to secondary education in the study area. It is noted from the respondents that there is no accessibility to schools in their native place, and they inferred that poverty is the main reason for not being able to access education.

Table No:3- Details of Origin of the Migration

| S. No | Particulars | Respondents | Percent |
|-------|---------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | BIHAR | 60 | 72.3 |
| 2 | ASSAM | 14 | 16.9 |
| 3 | ODISHA | 1 | 1.2 |
| 4 | WEST BENGAL | 5 | 6.0 |
| 5 | UTTAR PRADESH | 3 | 3.6 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 |

Source: Primary Data

72.3 percent of the migrant construction workers migrated from the state of Bihar, while the remaining 16.9 percent were from Assam, 6.0 percent from West Bengal, 3.6 percent from Uttar Pradesh, and 1.2 percent of the respondents were from Odisha. Several studies have pointed out that out-migration from Bihar to other states is due to employment reasons, and there is a lack of employment opportunities in the state of Bihar.

The study gathered information from the respondents that 92.8 percent of the construction workers migrated to Chennai for the first time for construction work. Most of them came with their contractors and relatives.

Table No: 4- Social Status of the Migrant Workers

| S.NO | Particulars | Respondents | Percent |
|------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | SC | 60 | 72.3 |



| | | | |
|---|-------|----|-------|
| 2 | ST | 16 | 19.3 |
| 3 | BC | 7 | 8.4 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 |

Source: Primary Data

Table No. 4 states that 72.3 percent of the respondents belong to the Scheduled Caste, and 19.3 percent of the respondents belong to the Scheduled Tribe. The remaining 8.4 percent of the migrant construction workers belong to the Backward Community in the study area.

Table No: 5 Migrant Status of the Respondents to Chennai

| S.No | Particulars | Respondents | Percent |
|------|--------------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | LESS THAN 6 MONTHS | 20 | 24.1 |
| 2 | 6 MONTHS TO 1 YEAR | 26 | 31.3 |
| 3 | 1-3 YEARS | 23 | 27.7 |
| 4 | MORE THAN 3 YEARS | 14 | 16.9 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 |

Source: Primary Data

From Table No. 5, it is observed that the majority 31.3 percent of the migrant construction workers have been working in Chennai for about 6 months to one year. This is followed by 27.7 percent of the respondents who have been working for 1–3 years, 24.1 percent for less than one year, and the remaining 16.9 percent have been working in Chennai for more than 3 years. Apart from the 24.1 percent who migrated less than 6 months ago, all other workers reported visiting their native place twice a year. The study also noted that 92.8 percent of the respondents migrated alone, without their family members. It is further observed that 72 percent of the respondents are married and have children.

The study found that prior to migrating to Chennai and after migration, the respondents did not receive any formal training. It is also noted that migrant workers are not willing to undergo formal training. There is a lack of training centres for construction workers in the country. They acquire construction knowledge from their neighbours, relatives, family members, and friends. Some institutes such as Tamil Nadu ITT, L&T, Construction Training Management in Bengaluru, and Contractors Development Institute in Hyderabad offer training, but these institutes are not available across India. Accessibility to these opportunities is also very low. It is further noted that employers do not provide skill-based training.



Table No: 6 - Monthly Income of the Respondents

| S. No | Particulars | Respondents | Percent |
|-------|------------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | 10,000-15,000 | 22 | 26.5 |
| 2 | 15,001- 20,000 | 49 | 59.03 |
| 3 | 20,000 and Above | 12 | 14.4 |
| 4 | Total | 83 | 100 |

Source: Primary Data

Table No. 6 discusses the monthly income of the respondents in the study area. The majority 59.03 percent of the migrant construction workers earn about ₹15,001 to ₹20,000 per month, followed by 26.5 percent who earn ₹10,000 to ₹15,000, and 14.4 percent of the respondents earn above ₹20,000. It is noted that all the migrant construction workers earn monthly wages only. This income is after deductions for accommodation and food. Workers earning ₹20,000 and above are supervisors and in charge of other workers in the study area. It was also noted that there is generally no delay in receiving wages each month. However, delays sometimes occur due to the agents of the construction migrant workers. The study also reported that none of the respondents in the study area are aware of the minimum wage for construction workers.

Table No: 7- Satisfaction Level of the Respondents on Current Wage

| S. No | Particulars | Respondents | Percent |
|-------|----------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | VERY SATISFIED | 7 | 8.4 |
| 2 | SATISFIED | 65 | 78.3 |
| 3 | NEUTRAL | 11 | 13.3 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 |

Source: Primary Data

78.3 percent of the respondents reported that their current job in Chennai is satisfactory. Another 13.3 percent said it is somewhat okay, while 8.4 percent stated they are very satisfied



working in Chennai. The main reason most respondents felt satisfied is that working in another state is considered prestigious in their hometown.

During the investigation, it was observed that the living conditions of the migrant construction workers were not good. Living rooms are made of iron tins. Chennai's climate is very hot compared to other districts in Tamil Nadu. It is very hard to live in rooms made of iron tins, but the employees continue to stay in the same rooms. Toilet facilities are not available, and they use open defecation near the slums. For cooking, they use traditional wooden stoves only. The living places are safe during the summer, but during the rainy season, it is difficult to stay there because Chennai experiences floods every year. For drinking water, they access lorry-supplied water. They do not have access to RO or purified water at their residence.

Respondents said that if they experience cough, headache, or fever, they use tablets provided by their supervisors. They visit hospitals only in case of major injury or accidents at the workplace. A first aid box is available at the workplace but not at their residence.

Table No: 8- Social Integration Experience in Chennai by the Construction Migrant Workers

| S.No | Particulars | Respondents | Percent |
|------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | YES | 10 | 12.0 |
| 2 | NO | 73 | 88.0 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 |

Source: Primary Data

88 percent of the respondents reported that there is no discrimination or different behavior by the people of Chennai because they are migrants from other states. The remaining 12 percent of the respondents said that there is discrimination in behavior by the local people while they go shopping during weekdays.

Table No: 9- Work Continuation Plan in Chennai by the Respondents

| S. No | Particulars | Respondents | Percent |
|-------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | YES | 72 | 86.7 |
| 2 | NO | 11 | 13.3 |
| | Total | 83 | 100.0 |

Source: Primary Data

86 percent of the respondents are interested in working in Chennai in the upcoming years. The remaining 13 percent reported that they are not interested in continuing their job next year. The 86 percent expressed interest due to the continued availability of opportunities in Chennai.



Suggestion and Recommendation

The study focused only on Chennai city; it is a micro-level study. Scholars and researchers can extend their research to the macro level covering all districts across Tamil Nadu.

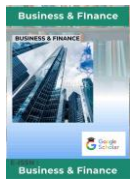
Recommendation for policy makers: Migrants should be granted permits to work in other states, not just in Tamil Nadu or Chennai, but across all states of India. This would allow outward migration to be registered in the home state, and inward migration to be registered in the destination state. The Government of India can safeguard the lives of migrant workers by establishing a **Ministry of Migration** dedicated to their welfare. Although rules and regulations exist for migrant workers, they should be strictly enforced by officials in both the home and destination states. Every migrant should be accounted for.

Conclusion:

Without migrant labour, no economy can function especially in the construction sector. The lives and workplace environments of migrant construction workers must be safeguarded to ensure their well-being. Shelter is a fundamental human need across the world, yet the lives of those who build these shelters are often the most neglected particularly in Chennai, and not just there, but in major cities and states across India. The responsibility for the welfare of migrant construction workers does not lie with the government alone. Site owners and building contractors also share this responsibility and must be held accountable.

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