

Construction Workers in Delhi Struggle to Meet Their Basic Needs

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The largest number of workers in Delhi are construction workers. Women are also employed in construction work in significant numbers. However their presence in more skilled work like that of masons is negligible.

Recent interviews with several construction workers in Delhi revealed that the overwhelming majority of them are involved in a constant struggle to meet their basic needs. Typically if husband and wife both are employed then the household earning on an average day may be INR 900 to INR 1000, while in case of only an adult male working the earning can be INR 500 to INR 700. In a month of good employment, employment of about 22 days may be available and hence, if all remains well, then monthly earning can range from INR 22,000 to INR 11,000, or lower still for a single woman.

However this is true only for a good month. This work can be very tiring and risky and there can be prolonged inability to work due to illness or injury. During winter months the work is stopped for several weeks as part of pollution prevention steps. On days of heavy rains also work is often not available. Workers sometimes have to go to their villages for family responsibilities. Due to all these factors the actual average monthly earning can be less than what has been mentioned above.

Some significant relief is obtained by the availability of free food grain up to 5kg per family member per month. However in the case of many households not all family member names are listed. If there is a six-member family and only three names appear in the ration card, then this family gets 15kg free food grain instead of 30kg. Some of the poorest households including relatively new migrants do not have ration cards and hence do not get free food grain. However it is important to remember that even those who get the full quota can meet their needs for only half a month and for the remaining part they have to purchase from the open market where the price of wheat, the most commonly consumed grain, has increased significantly.

The economics of meeting basic needs worsens for those who have to pay rent. Here again the poorest households and new migrants, still unsettled, face a more adverse situation by having to pay relatively high rent even for precarious housing. Electricity may be free in Delhi for many others living in their own homes but the landlord is likely to charge them for electricity too.

Many construction workers have to incur significant transport expenses for commuting to work as several of the inner city area slums have been shifted over the years to outer areas.

As work is more likely to be available in the main city area, the employment opportunities for workers have decreased while their transport costs have increased. These transport costs must be deducted to find the net income of workers. For women workers this burden is decreased somewhat by free bus transport but the bus service is generally not good.

So if we add up all these factors the condition that emerges is that just to meet the most basic needs is a constant struggle. So if anything unfortunate happens or for any other reason loan has to be taken, indebtedness can drag on for a long time, also considering that loan is often obtained with considerable difficulty at a rate of 10 per cent per month.

In addition workers repeatedly speak of the high burden of inflation including high price of staple food items. Wage rise has been more limited compared to rise in cost of living, they say. The legal rise in minimum wages rates is not reflected in same wage hike in actual practice. Sometimes workers do not get a part of the wages due to them due to some disruptive factor or the other, or deliberate cheating by employer or contractor.

Conditions in the colonies where most construction workers live can be extremely dirty and the arrangements for several basic facilities leave much to be desired. Heat levels in the prolonged summer are getting higher than before. A relaxed sleep at the end of a very hard work is by no means assured, given the lack of basic facilities as well as exposure to extreme weather in residential areas.

Such conditions increase the possibility of the consumption of liquor by male workers which adds further to the woes of women.

A relatively small number of construction workers, more likely those coming from a better economic base, succeed in improving their prospects somewhat by becoming petty contractors. Those construction workers living in inner areas can have relatively better opportunities. However for the great majority of construction workers in Delhi, who in turn constitute the largest segment of Delhi's work force, life remains a very tough struggle to somehow meet basic needs, and at times even this is not possible, resulting in hunger or very limited access to food, denial of essential medical care, prematurely ending education of children and great tension due to inability to clear debt.

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