

# Construction

Benoy Peter and Vishnu Narendran





**Construction sector in Kerala heavily depends on migrant labour and engages the largest proportion of such workers in the state.**

CMID/Savanan R.S.

## Construction Sector in Kerala

Construction provides employment to the largest proportion of workers from outside the state.<sup>iii</sup> However, robust estimates of migrant workers engaged in construction are not yet available. The sector is constituted of large scale civil engineering projects commissioned by the central and state governments, construction of malls, apartment complexes, convention centres, hospitals, factories and other major work in the private sector and construction of buildings, houses and other structures in urban and rural areas across all the 14 districts in the state. While the first two categories are undertaken by multinational or Indian infrastructure development companies, local builders take up most of the small scale constructions.

Vizhinjam port, track doubling and modernisation of railway stations in Kottayam district, Kochi Metro Rail, expansion of Kochi Refinery, Kannur airport, expansion of Kochi airport, Information Technology Parks in Thiruvananthapuram and Kochi, Solar Park and Central University in Kasaragod, roads, including national highways in various districts, check dams, regulators and flyovers are some of the government commissioned construction projects in the state which engage migrant workers.

Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Kozhikode districts are the major construction hubs in Kerala. In Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode, the city bypasses have become construction corridors and in Ernakulam district, Kochi city and its agglomerations cover major constructions. In Thrissur, construction is live in and around Puzhakkal and Viyyur. All the three categories of

construction heavily depend on migrant labour for the execution of work. The expansion of Kochi Refinery during 2016-2017 engaged over 10,000 migrant workers, both skilled and unskilled. Even in remote areas across the districts, migrant workers are engaged in construction, be it Anakkampoyil in Kozhikode or Panickankudy in Idukki. However, there is a marked difference in the dynamics which can be broadly classified into two streams.

## Large Scale Construction

Large scale construction is undertaken by companies which take up such work all over India. These companies employ migrant labourers for most of the skilled and unskilled work. Workers are mobilised from the source states through a network of contractors and agents, sometimes with advance payments. The majority of the workers engaged in such work are young single men from backward communities in rural areas, predominantly from Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. Workers from other states also are found, but in fewer numbers. Women are not generally engaged in large numbers. However, women from Buldhana district of Vidarbha region in Maharashtra were found working on such a construction site at Sitangoli in Kasaragod district. Even Labour Contract Societies in Kerala engage migrant workers. One of the oldest such societies in the Malabar region which undertakes significant infrastructure development projects in Kerala employs nearly 1000 workers, predominantly from West Bengal, Odisha and Assam. Workers are generally provided free accommodation and transport to the work sites. In many cases, they are

housed at the construction site itself. Temporary labour camps made of corrugated sheets, typical of construction sector all over India can be found within or nearby the construction sites of Kasaragod Central University; Kannur airport; Infopark, Kochi and Kochi Refinery. Migrant workers engaged in the construction of Kochi Metro were housed in the HMT colony in Kalamassery and near the LNG terminal in Puthuvype.

Among the unskilled workers in the construction sector in Kerala, those who work on the large scale construction sites get the lowest wages as their wages are not fixed based on the Kerala labour market. Their daily wage could be as low as ₹300. The workers are herded from one site to another and next site could be in Haryana or Bengaluru where the contractor cannot offer a daily wage comparable to that in Kerala. Workers in this category typically do not have the freedom to choose employment in Kerala given the kind of commitment they have with the contractors who have recruited them at their native place for the particular company. Workers at the major construction sites are more likely to use protective gears compared to the rest.

## Minor Construction

Migrant workers in minor construction are more or less footloose. Most of them arrive in Kerala through their social network. They are either engaged by Malayali contractors or a contractor from the workers' native place. Contractors from Tamil Nadu have been undertaking the concreting work of buildings in Kochi for more than two decades. A sizeable proportion of workers in the smaller construction sites are recruited from the labour *naka*.<sup>1</sup>

Workers from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and several other states are hired in such a manner. A Keralite can even hire a mason from the *naka* who will come

along with his team and finish the work on a flat rate or on daily wage basis. In Kasaragod and Wayanad districts, men and women from Karnataka, particularly from the backward North Karnataka region, are commonly available for unskilled work. A lot of them come with families including kids. Tamil and Bengali<sup>2</sup> speaking workers constitute the majority of the *naka* based labour in the rest of the districts. Couples (husband and wife) come from Tamil Nadu to work in the construction sector leaving the children at their native places with elders or relatives. Single men and women also come from Tamil Nadu for work. *Lambadis*, a Scheduled Tribe from Anantpur district in Andhra Pradesh, also seek work from Kadavanthra, Kaloore and Thevara labour *nakas* in Kochi city. From states such as West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh, single men come. There are also groups of workers who work under the same Malayali contractor for years. The men are typically addressed *Bhai* or *Annan* depending on whether they are from North/East India or Tamil Nadu.

The migrant workers on small construction sites get higher daily wages compared to those on the larger construction sites, ranging from ₹400 to ₹650 and even beyond, for unskilled work. Among the skilled and unskilled workers on the local construction sites, for the same work, the Malayali workers get the highest wages followed by workers from Tamil Nadu and the lowest by workers from other Indian states. The availability of work is highly flexible unlike those on the large scale construction sites who have steady jobs and regular wages. Most of the footloose workers live in rented rooms, paying from their own pockets. They often choose affordable

1. *Naka* is a Hindi word meaning 'junction'. Workers gather at select junctions in most towns early in the morning seeking work; for example at East Fort in Thiruvananthapuram, Kaloore in Kochi, Meenjantha in Kozhikode, Kaltex Junction in Kannur and Hosangadi Circle in Manjeswaram.
2. Workers from West Bengal, Assam and Bangladesh whose mother tongue is Bengali.



Most of the migrant workers in the construction sector are neither part of any trade union in Kerala nor are they registered with the Kerala Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board.





Tamil and Bengali speaking workers constitute the majority of the *naka* based labour in Kerala.

accommodation available. Lodging facilities rented out to migrant workers are a common sight in most of the towns in Kerala. Workers from the neighbouring states are found living on the streets also in select towns. A lot of workers from Karnataka are seen spending the night at the traffic circle in Cherkala in Kasaragod. Similarly, workers from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, including women, can be found sleeping at the Kaloor junction on the Kaloor-Kadavanthra road as well as inside the Kaloor private

bus stand, in Ernakulam district. Most of the workers in the construction sector are neither part of any trade union in Kerala<sup>iii,iv</sup> nor are they registered with the Kerala Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board. Vellimadukunnu in Kozhikode district, Vathuruthi and Perumbavoor in Ernakulam District, Paippad in Kottayam district, and Kazhakkuttam in Thiruvananthapuram district are some of the major residential pockets of migrant workers in the construction sector in Kerala.

## References

- i Narayana, D. and Venkiteswaran, C.S. and Joseph, M. P. (2013), Domestic Migrant Labour in Kerala, Gulati Institute of Finance and taxation, Thiruvananthapuram.
- ii Surabhi, K.S., and Kumar, N.A. (2007), Labour Migration to Kerala: A Study of Tamil Migrant Labourers in Kochi, Working Paper No 16, Centre for Socio-economic and Environmental Studies: Available at <http://csesindia.org/admin/modules/cms/docs/publication/16.pdf>.
- iii Nayak, N (No Date), Migrants Filling in the Labour Gap in Kerala: Where Progressive Labour Norms Don't Apply: Available at <http://www.sewakerala.org/downloads.php?id=2>.
- iv Moses, J.W. and Rajan, S.I. (2012), Labour migration and Integration in Kerala, Labour and Development, 19(1), June 2012.

June 2017

## Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development

CMID is an independent non-profit think tank devoted to migration and inclusive development, advocating for and promoting the social inclusion of migrants. CMID provides evidence informed solutions for mainstreaming inter-state migrant workers in India. This sector brief was prepared based on a qualitative research undertaken by the authors across the 14 districts in Kerala during November 2016–May 2017. The study was funded by Thummarukudy Foundation. CMID also acknowledges the fellowship provided to the authors by Aajeevika Bureau during January to June 2017.



Centre for Migration and  
Inclusive Development.



📍 P.M.C. V/223A, Thuruthiparambu, Perumbavoor, Ernakulam, Kerala, India - 683542.

☎ +91 484 2595256 ✉ [contact@cmid.org.in](mailto:contact@cmid.org.in)