

Role of Women in the Struggle of Tamil Nadu Construction Workers Geetha

A ray of hope has dawned in the hearts of Tamil Nadu Construction Workers in the recent May Day announcement by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister. The long drawn struggle of Tamil Nadu Construction Workers in which women have played an important role, has been vindicated by the Government's declaration that Tamil Nadu Manual Workers' Act would be implemented for construction workers and that tripartite boards would be set up in Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore; amendment to TN manual workers' Act authorizing the Board to collect levy before a plan sanction and enhancement of accident relief from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 20,000 to families of fatal accident victims from CM's Relief Fund.

It is significant that Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Act which was enacted by MGR Government in 1982 as a result of the struggle of construction workers from 1979-81, remained on paper till Tamil Maanila Kattida Thozhilalav Sangam (TMKTS) forged ahead in its statewide struggle for the implementation of the law for Construction Workers.

TMKTS has been agitating for regulation of employment and provision of ESI, PF, gratuity, monsoon allowance, pension, housing and creches for construction workers through tripartite construction labour board; as a first step for gazette notification of the Tamil Nadu Construction Workers (Regulation of employment, social security and conditions of work) scheme 1990 drafted by National Campaign Committee for Central law on Construction Labour of which TMKTS in a part. The government of Tamil Nadu had made promises at various points during the last four years that they would implement TN Manual Workers' Act but had been dragging its feet.

The struggle had focussed the attention of the public and state government to the long pending demands of the construction workers through the massive rally on July 27, 1992, the one day token strike and Rasta Roko by peacefully squatting construction Workers in 16 districts and 3 day strike in Government constructions on 29, 30, and 31st March along with processions and dharnas in 20 districts. Women workers participated in numbers in the July 92 rally, Feb 9 Rasta Roko as well as strike-procession program in March 93. During the Rasta Roko and one day strike, nearly 3 lakhs construction workers participated while 25,000 including 5000 women were arrested. In Madras, workers most of them being women who squatted near Secretariat on Mount Road near Labour Commissioner's office and on PH road near Nehru Stadium were brutally lathi-charged and Yesodhamma who suffered a fracture is yet to recover and get back to work. Solidarity actions by NFCL in Bangalore and fraternal organisations in Delhi condemned the incident.

The women and men all over the State enthusiastically participated in the agitation while their felt needs such as regulation of employment and wages, provisions of social security and welfare measures through construction Labour Board, payment of minimum wages and provisions of identity cards and amenities on Government sites, housing and public distribution issues formed the Charter of demands.

The Government of Tamil Nadu is intending to implement a welfare scheme to

provide pension, creches and accident relief while TMKTS has been demanding a scheme to regulate employment, and implement social security, safety and welfare measures. Moreover, the registration of workers and employers, election of representatives to the tripartite board with proportionate representation to women are the issues put forward by NCC-CL on which government of Tamil Nadu is yet to take a clear stand. Also, the implementation of the scheme needs to be monitored by NCC-CL so that the opportunistic elements do not take over the hard won scheme and vitiate the conditions and to ensure that the benefits reach the construction workers and that the construction workers are able to participate creatively in determining their lives.

The NCC-CL, while reaffirming the need for central legislation for construction labour, needs to focus attention on the plight of construction workers especially women and child workers and the violations widely prevalent on sites where government is the principal employer.

The problems of Women and Child Labour in Construction

Women and child labourers constitute 40% of the work force in construction, who number 20 million in the country and 2.5 million in the State of Tamil Nadu. The women and child labourers, called Chithals - small persons, are in the lowest rung in the hierarchy of relationships, get the lowest wages but carry out hard physical labour even in the sweltering heat of the summer. The invisibility and exploitation of construction workers, especially women in particular is apparent in the industry, in the house-building sector and more so in the Government constructions which are carried out through the system of contract and sub-contract.

In the house-building and medium sized constructions, workers are recruited either directly by maistris from slums and squatter settlements in cities and towns or from market places where they gather in the morning for work. There is fierce competition by maistris as well as workers to get work and the worse affected are the women labourers. In Tamil Nadu, the market place workers in big cities like Madras, Madurai, and Coimbatore are paid minimum wages of Rs. 35, while the maistri attached labour is paid between Rs. 30 and Rs. 35. The number of days of work ranges between 15 to 20 a month in the former case while in the latter it is 20-25 days a month.

Stagnation and Discrimination

In the district and Taluk towns and in the villages, the wage levels of women remain between Rs 15 to 25. There is no improvement in wages with experience since they start their work life at the age of 10, by fifty years they lose their working capacity and feel left out since they are not preferred for work.

Women face discrimination in the area of skill acquisition and so no promotional avenues exist for them. TMKTS has trained women in masonry with the assistance from Ministry of Labour and HUDCO. While this provides a model, overcoming discrimination would entail regulation of employment through the Board, which would train unskilled

labourers irrespective of sex and provide equal opportunities for promotion.

Thus regulation of employment and wages are the uppermost felt needs of women labourer in the State.

The Plight of Workers in Government Sites

In the government construction, whether it be Central, State, Quasi-Government, or Local body which is the principal employer, the wage rates are lower than the prevailing rates in any city or town. A survey was carried out with the assistance of Centre for Labour Education and Development in which E. Raman E. Muniswamy, R. Dhanasekar, S. Hari, G. Anjali Indirani, Kumari, Kannamma, and Renuka met construction workers on government sites such as Nehru stadium, Filmcity, Telugu Ganga Project, Madras Refineries Manali, Madras Refineries Narimanam, Madras Harbour, Madras Rapid Transport System under Southern Railway, TAMIN factory Barugur, PWD construction at Tirumayam and Barugur. In all the sites women were recruited through sub-contractors, even in MRTS where IRCON and NPCC were contractors, and in TAMIN where TNSCC, public sector company in the State was the contractor.

Nowhere were minimum wages paid to the unskilled workers, the women were paid wages between Rs 20 and Rs 25 while male unskilled labour were paid wages Rs 30-35. No employment card or wage slip was provided to the workers though many hundreds were employed on every one of the sites. The child workers were present in every government site and were two hundred in the Telugu Ganga Project.

Lack of provision of drinking water was felt by the workers in every site. The children left in the sand and unsafe places cared by older children was a common phenomena on most of the sites. In madras harbour, there were one hundred children below 5 years and sixty older children who were looking after the young ones.

Since there was no canteen, not even a tea shop near the sites at Telugu Ganga Project and Narimanam, the workers had to travel miles even to get a cup of tea or a soda. In Telugu Ganga, workers were washing themselves in a stagnant pool of dirty water due to lack of washing facilities.

The workers in government sites were migrants brought from drought hit areas of Sarcot and Salem districts, housed near the sites in low and tiny hutments measuring 6'x8' with no drinking water, toilet or light facilities.

The workers employed in construction of factories MRL or TAMIN were not provided with ESI or PF. The accident that occurred in the construction of Nehru Stadium became an important issue in the agitation, even for payment of compensation.

Minimum Wages Act, Equal Remuneration Act, Contract Labour Act, Child Labour Act, and ESI Act as well as ILO conventions were violated in all government sites, though each project had cost many crores.

Housing

Majority of construction workers are homeless and live in slums or on pavements. Absence of basic amenities increase the burden of house-work for the women labour who are put to great hardships due to lack of drinking water or toilets.

Slum evictions and slum fires leading to deaths of children of women construction workers leave them in a precarious condition. Government of Tamil Nadu has a policy of neo-untouchability in the name of vision 2000 pushing slum dwellers to outskirts of cities.

The TMKTS took initiative to identifying land acquired under the Urban Land Ceiling Act and formed a housing co-operative of construction workers in 1990, while the State government is yet to register the co-operative.

PDS

The prices of rice and essential commodities have soared in the open market while the quantum of rice provided in PDS has been reduced. Women have to cope with this situation.

The impact of low wages on Status of Women Labour

The low wages paid to women workers, in the present situation of rising prices has made their existence precarious. 30-50% of the women labourers are single women and shouldering family responsibilities. Every day life is a struggle and medical expenses, house rent and education of children and basic survival during non-employment periods have become so difficult that indebtedness and sending children to work have become the necessary evils in their lives.

In the migrant labour, the added problem of moving from site to site and total lack of child care or educational facilities, leads to child labour and thus the families of construction workers are bonded to the industry from one generation to the other.

Accidents - Safety and Compensation

Accidents, simple grievances and fatal are an everyday feature of construction industry. Fatal accidents have taken place due to open lift wells, electrocution, fall from the roof, caving of the earth, collapse of walls, etc, while measures are absent. Lack of proof of employment and a total indifference on the part of principal employer's contractor to own up liability are the difficulties in getting compensation. Due to the efforts of TMKTS, the State government has a government order to provide accident relief of Rs 10,000 for families of fatal accident victims and Rs 5000 for loss of one limb, from CM's relief fund.

Maternity and Health Issues

Women work till the end of pregnancy and get back to work soon after delivery in order to make both ends meet. In fact they get into debt to meet the expenses during child

birth. Since the women carry heavy loads and climb ladders, they complain of headache, body pain, and exhaustion, as well as of breathing difficulties and as they inhale dust and cement. Again, since there is no ESI, every bout of sickness gets them in debt.

Struggle Path and Tasks before NCC-CL

Women construction workers all over the State of Tamil nadu feel the need for regulation of employment and wages, provision of ESI, PF, pension, monsoon allowance, housing and creches. For the women labourers who sweat and toil to build the country, struggle is the only way in which there is going to be some light in their own lives and in the lives of their children.

NCC-CL needs to focus the campaign in the light of the foregoing analysis as well and build campaigns around issues of violations in government sites, of women labour and work towards elimination of child labourers, help in bringing the women out and involving men and women in resolution of common issues as well as specific issues faced by women labour.