

Problems of Women Construction Workers
"Children of Women Construction Workers
and Programmes of Voluntary Organizations
for their Welfare."

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The People: Profile of Migrant Community

The vast majority of construction workers in Delhi are unskilled labourers who have migrated to the city from the surrounding rural areas in search of work. More often than not, they are landless labourers or marginal farmers with small land-holdings who are driven to the city to seek work after a bad harvest, or to free themselves from debt. They live in temporary shelters on the edge of large construction sites and work on daily wages. Both husband and wife have to work to make ends meet. Their employment on a particular worksite ranges from one month to nine months, depending on a number of factors including the stage the construction has reached when they start working, and their need to return to their villages at a particular time. The average length of employment on one worksite is about three months. However, there is no guarantee of continuous employment. Rain, shortage of materials, delays in plans being finalised and a host of other causes can interrupt construction activity. They then have to seek work on another site for a few days, community on foot, carrying their young to distant work-site within the city.

Their ties with the village are still very strong, They normally go back during the harvesting and sowing seasons to work on the land in return for grain. It is difficult to generalise, but most of these workers tend to return to their

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villages twice a year for about two months at a time, spending the remaining eight months seeking work on the construction sites in the cities. It is, therefore, a life of constant movement within the city itself and, of course, between the village and the city.

The construction labourers are brought to the city in groups by a labour contractor (Jamadar) who secures work and camping facilities for them. He is often a man from their own village. Each 'Jamadar' sets up a cluster of makeshift huts for his workers which rarely spills over or mingles with the clusters set up by other labour contractors. There can be four or five camps or clusters on a worksite, each separate and controlled by its own 'Jamadar'. He advances loans, disburses payments, maintains discipline and is in close contact with the labourers whom he brings with him to the city. The construction workers give him roughly 10 per cent of their wages in return for the services he provides.

The labour camps are just a row of makeshift huts - piles of bricks (without mortar) for walls, old tin sheets or meagre thatch for roofs, an opening slung with sacking for a door and the earth for flooring. A man cannot stand to his full height in a hut and the space is barely sufficient for one string cot, a chulah and a few utensils. The availability and quality of water varies from site to site. Sanitation and drains do not exist. Rubbish piles up. The huts are cramped and there is no shelter to sit under when the weather is wet or hot.

A whole generation of children is being raised in these bleak circumstances. Even though schools, hospitals and other amenities exist near most work-sites, the migrant workers cannot take advantage of them due to illiteracy, lack of confidence and their constant mobility. The schooling system does not bend to their needs and civic authorities do not consider that this population has any claims at all to responsible action on their part.

The Children: Effects of Migrancy

The sharpest and most obvious impact of this environment is on the health of the young child. A harsh elimination process takes place during the crucial period of early childhood. The young child suffers the most in these conditions. Not only is she affected physically, but she has to do without her mother's affection. Burdened with household chores on top of a heavy working day, the mother hastily 'dumps' her infants in the charge of older brothers and sisters, most of whom are not much older than 6-7 years themselves. There are no elders, as in an extended family, who can help out. Babies are given heavy rotis and spicy chutneys to eat before their system knows how to cope with such a diet. Dust, exposure to the elements and enteric infections take their toll and many succumb. Others are severely malnourished and have a variety of deficiency diseases.

The children who survive this period are tough. In most cases, the parents grew up in a rural situation where, even though they may have been poverty stricken, the physical environment was healthier. On urban worksites, however, sugar is substituted for jaggery, grain is more expensive, vegetables and milk are beyond the reach of most families - hence, the conditions which laid the foundations of physical sturdiness for the

parents are denied to the children. Not only is the migrant way of life constantly eroding the physical status of this child group, it is also eroding those factors which provided their parents both psychological and emotional stability. The migrating workers constitute strong cultural entities, carrying the definite stamp of rural communities that have drawn sustenance and stability from a life close to agricultural rhythms, from religion and from traditional values. They have a well-defined code of behaviour and it is this that gives them their fearlessness, their strength and their pride. These vital stabilising factors are denied to the children. In place of a settled community, the child is plunged into a situation which is governed by transitoriness. The faces around him keep changing. Many of his companions come from other dialect areas and it is difficult for the child to develop friendships. The only constants are his immediate family - a nuclear situation made more severe by constant changes in camping sites. The implications of this situation seem to be that children with very little experience of group interaction are likely to be more deeply affected by the situation of drift and tension, in addition to being subjected to the stresses imposed by their precarious economic status. Added to this is the absence of friendships, the lack of childhood ties and the weakening of roots.

The rural setting provides knowledge of agricultural processes, of plant and animal life. Hence, even if the child did not go to school, she had areas of experience to sustain her. Children are felt to be ^anuisance on the work-site, getting in the way of work. They pick up some elementary knowledge of concreting, use of steel for lintels, etc., but not very many more of the skills required in construction activity. Thus, with learning

opportunities severely limited and being shut out from the school system, the migrant child is more vulnerable, more exposed and less equipped to deal with the harsh features of marginal existence.

History: Evolution of the Mobile Creches Programme

In 1969, the year of the Gandhi Centenary, Meera Mahadevan, a housewife and writer, was appointed to a women and children's sub-committee for observing the centenary year. She was a woman of warm responses and rich imagination. Meera sensed an ironic contrast in the plight of the workers who were toiling to build the Centenary pavilion amidst the fanfare, the expenditure, the seminars on Gandhi's thought, Children lying on the rubble near women working in the dust and heat, and the scene a monument to Gandhi. Meera's simple response was that there was a crying need to provide some shelter for these young ones, perhaps only protection from the elements and a watchful eye to soothe them when they cried and to stop them staying to the water tanks and earthworks.

So, the first creche was set up in tent. It hardly fitted the concept of a creche, Dirty, ragged children, a rather lost creche worker, a few toys, a charpoy and a tent that kept falling down - that is all it was. But from this simple act sprang the exploration of a small group of woman into the lives of migrant unskilled workers, and the problems that face children who live in this situation. From this exploration grew an organization - people, methods, knowledge and an understanding of what programmes were required for these disadvantaged children. Thus was Mobile Creches created.

The organisation soon found itself facing a number of problems. First, the poor sanitary conditions in the labour camps called for a chain of activities including clinical and preventive health care, nutrition and the creation of basic standards of child care for children in such circumstances. Second, the older children also had to be attended and this meant the the evaluation of a programme for nursery and primary education which would not only keep the children occupied but also suit the special needs and requirements of the situation. Third, the virtual absence of workers trained to deal with such a wide variety of activities and situations led to the evolution of a programme of training and management which is a major feature of the programme today. Finally, there were the usual teething problems of recognition, funding, accommodation, etc. besides of course the problems of working with building contractors and coordinating with several government department. Later on, the organisation carried the programme to resettlement colonies, catering to the needs of children of working mothers belonging to the lowest economic groups engaged in such occupations as domestic service, scavenging, hawking and vending and ragpicking.

The Present

Today, Mobile Creches is a chain of centres set up on large construction sites - each centre existing so long as the construction lasts. The centres are housed in tin sheds, or incomplete parts of building - in fact, in any temporary accommodation available on a construction site. The facilities are the barest minimum - very often the floor is only roughly laid bricks or just earth, the windows are without shutters and often there is no running water. In resettlement colonies, low-cost structures using local materials have been put up to house the centres.

At any given time there are about 50 centres in operation in Delhi and Bombay and another 2 or 3 in Pune. A team of 4 to 5 creche workers and teachers organise a day-long programme for 50-150 children in the age group of 0-14 years, six days a week, right through the course of the construction.

The children are divided into 3 groups for convenience: Creche (0-3 years) Balwadi (3-6 years) and those above 6 for whom informal primary education is provided. In practice, however, the groupings are not rigid and there is considerable freedom, of movement. This enables the older children to take care of and comfort the younger ones, keeping the infants on their laps or besides them as they study or play. The daily creche routine emphasises cleanliness, habit formation, nutrition and affectionate interaction with adults. One of a panel of doctors visits each centre once a week to treat ailments and give advice on preventive health. The follow-up is done by the staff at each centre. Advice to mothers on health, nutrition, family planning and child care is usually given informally during such meetings or when the staff go around the labour camp in the mornings.

The daily programme for the 3 to 6 consists of a wide variety of structured and unstructured play using simple, low-cost easily available and replaceable materials. Educational games, the arts, and song and dance form the core of the programme which gradually prepares the child through participation in a structured programme. The 6+ get more formal lessons in language, mathematics and social studies and are helped to acquire the basic skills of numeracy and literacy. Informal methods are used in teaching, stressing play, games and handwork. Older children who have been helped to enter local municipal schools usually come back to participate in activities like art, music and sports.

The usual daily routine is as follows : Between 8.00 and 10.00 a.m. the centre is cleaned and set up by the staff members. Subsequently, some of the members of the staff go to the homes of those children who have not come to the centre by that time. They bring these children to the centre while also spending time with the parents. This is followed by the washing and bathing of the young children, preparation and distribution of milk, prayers. Between 10.00 a.m. and mid-day there are different kinds of organised activities for each age-group; at twelve noon a supplementary mid-day meal of dalia (a porridge made out of broken wheat) with vegetables is provided to the children; this is followed by group 'clean-up'. The afternoons are spent in a variety of informal activities with an emphasis on art, music gardening, story-telling and reading followed by games and sports.

The Tasks

Mobile Creches' objectives have been very clear. First, to reach the children and the communities on the work sites. Second, to set up essential care and services at their doorstep. Third to do this in a shape and form that can be taken advantage of and in a way that creates strong interactions which form the psychological and emotional basis for change.

The first task has been an extremely difficult one. It has involved a long and slow struggle with contractors and authorities. As the construction workers live on the construction site itself, they cannot be reached without the permission of the contractors. The children of construction workers are treated as part of the landscape and are as indistinguishable as the dust area the mounds of earth and stone on a construction site.

Most people think it is an unnecessary luxury for children, accustomed to the dirt and cold, to have basic health, care and access to elementary education. Engineers on a work site, contractors and government officials hardly notice the child population at the construction site. When they are approached for space to open a centre they have often said that there are no more than 10-15 children at the site. But, subsequently, when the centre has opened 70-80 children crowd around.

Since the objective is to reach the communities, the only method that has proved successful has been persuasion and sheer determination. Confrontation, particularly when dealing with the unorganised sector, does not pay. Relentless, patient persuasion is the only way.

The second objective was equally difficult to achieve - how to bring essential care and educational opportunities to the work-sites. It meant that each team of people had to be able to teach, provide medical care, cook, deal with tensions and fights, soothe infants and channelise the mental energies of older children.

The third objective meant that essentials like health-care and education should reach the migrant child in a shape and form that he could use and take advantage of. Only then would the availability of literacy skills and opportunities form the basis of change.

The Search for a Viable Methodology

A school or health service is nothing in itself and can lead nowhere unless the service rests on an approach which seeks positive interactions and positive relationships at every point. Programmes for neglected groups have to be strong and comprehensive. The child has to be exposed to situations which give her confidence, she has to experience the pleasure of concentrated activity and the pride of competence. She must learn to articulate and to deal with people. In short, sure foundations have to be laid. Programmes which concentrate on doling out food

routinely and providing mechanical medication will not pull the child out of his situation. These are wasted inputs - basical / well-meaning acti as flung into . void. Psychological boosting and sound skills are required to alter a situation. A successful programme is dependent on those who carry these essentials to the work-sites - medicate while drawing out positive reactions, teach while developing positive relationships. The need is above all for people who can relate and not just impart the skills they possess.

Mobile Creches' methodology has been to find people, test their reactions and, if they relate, give them the skills they need. Mobile Creche workers are mainly non-professionals, or rather people with no specialisations. All the knowledge and skills they require have been acquired as they worked. Women - housewives, mothers and young students- form the backbone of the work force. Most of them are from socio-economic backgrounds where they are not used to many physical comforts. They are not so highly educated: as to be remote from the situation of illiteracy. The majority are young people with high school education who are continuing their education while they work. They can laugh and sing with the children and have the ability to work very hard.

Evolution of the Structure

It is worth stressing that the present organisational structure and procedures, of recruitment techniques, training and management have evolved over a period of almost fifteen years through a process of trial and error, and largely guided by non-professionals with no pre-conceived notions of management. The constraints and limitations of the situation in which Mobile Creches exists have also played a part in this evolution.

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Limitations of the Programme and Policy Implications

We do not visualise any easy solutions or dramatic changes in the circumstances of the children and their parents, in the immediate future. The path upward and outward is very hard and this is only a beginning. Only about 20 per cent of the children and families who come to Mobile Creches get sufficiently exposure to be able to make significant use of it. The opportunities provided. This stark situation has to be consered. There has to be legislation that protects unskilled workers. There also has to be a change in the way the building industry has organised its manpower, or rather has succeeded in keeping the labour force casual and unorganised. The legislation that projects the unskilled worker is the Contract Labour Act (R & A 1970) and recently the Migrant Labour Bill 1979. Both bills unfortunately evode the heart of the problem - the stability of the work force. The disadvantaged situation of the children cannot be improved till hard decisions are made about better planning for the manpower in the construction industry which will ensure a certain minimum number of consecutive days of residence and employment to families at one construction site.

We are aware that the building industry is subject to many uncertainties: budget cuts, changes in government policy, availability of materials. stabilishing the work force is a knotty problem but that does not prevent us from seeking solutions and focus+ing attention on it. In India, 50 per cent of the plan budget is devoted to construction, and the construction industry being the second largest employer, affects a vast number of people. The existing legislation gives the worker (a) a minimum wage - but only for the days he is employed; (b) the right to appeal but without the knowledge or tools with which is use the legal system; and (c) the facility of the creche without ensuring that it exists. It has ignored the older children altogether. The Migrant Labour Bill has now laid down some minimum requirements regarding shelter but this again is quite futie if the worker is not assured that he will be able to use this shelter for any length of time.

Vast funds are being allocated for construction. Marble and murals and architectural fantasies are changing the face of cities of Bombay and Delhi. The transformed skyline bears no memory or trace of the workers and their children who camped there and build these structures. It is time their human input into the development of this country is recognised and the right of their children to a future becomes a matter of universal concern.
