INTRODUCTION

Urbanisation is one of the most significant aspects of demographic transition of a developing country like India. After the Independence, development-planning efforts have accelerated the growth of the metropolitan cities, besides economic growth, social change and technological modernisation. The metropolitan cities have become the focal points of new development activities and centres of large-scale employment opportunities in industries, trade and commerce, transportation services and construction activities. It has resulted in the large-scale exodus of rural population to the cities, which subsequently formed new social groups. They engage in the physical development of the cities in India.

An important feature of the contemporary Indian city is the dichotomy of modern organised industrial sector which is dependent on capital accumulation accompanied by a stupendous labour force. This entails a division of labour based on fractionalisation of activities and multiplication of jobs. The co-existence of labour-oriented activities depending on reduced capital and primitive technology, along with modern capital-intensive sector, depicts the dichotomy—each operating at a different level. Such a dichotomy determines the occupational structure and the distribution of income. The duality is not an exception to the construction activity.

In the modern formal sector, incomes are high but entry is restricted, subject to the degree of capital intensity and little labour absorption capacity. The pre-requisites for entry in the modern sector are qualifications of education, training, finance, innovative skills and resource. As a result, a sizeable number of the urban population lacking education, skills or
resources, is employed in the informal sector where the workers receive abysmally low income when compared with the labourers in the formal sector, thus creating a dual economy. The co-existence of formal and informal workers in an urban economy leads to a widening of income inequalities.

Another urban duality is the disparity in socio-economic organisation of the cities in the developing countries. The uneven development of various social groups is reflected on the physical layout of the cities and the quality of the environment enjoyed by them. The rich people, wielding considerable economic power, social influence and decision-making ability, determine the physical development of the city to suit their own interest. Therefore, a portion of these cities, developed in the pattern of cities in affluent countries and the rest, is in stark blight. A large proportion of the budget of such metropolitan cities is being utilised for the benefit of the relatively well-to-do people. This has resulted in the growth of slums where a majority of construction workers inhabit, on par with the growth of house-building activities, development of residential neighbourhood and other constructions of luxurious or semi-luxurious commercial complexes. These constructions are made for the need and preferences of the privileged groups. The construction workers live in dilapidated and appalling housing conditions, finding it difficult to make both ends meet, through, they are called the 'creators' of cities.

The rapid growth of the cities in the developing countries warranted the unprecedented demand for housing, construction projects belonging to semi-government and other public sector agencies and private industrial
complexes. Most of the construction projects of individuals, private and public agencies are carried out by informal workers.

According to the 1991 Census, the unorganised sector provides employment to more than 90 per cent of India’s workforce and produce nearly two-thirds of the Gross National Product.¹ As per the recommendations of the National Commission on Labour in India (1989) construction workers are included under the purview of unorganised labour. It is based on the fact that construction workers exert more physical effort in their employment. Moreover, their employers exploit them socially and economically. The increased emphasis on liberalisation, globalisation, and feminisation of employment decreases the social protection measures offered to the informal workers by different labour laws enacted by the State and Union Governments.

The Problem and Scope

The term unorganised or informal labour is foreign to any of the labour laws of the country and also falls short of a legal definition. In common parlance, it refers to those workers who have not been organised into trade unions. But in reality, it corresponds with unprotected labourers who are employed in informal or unorganised sector. They put up with a great deal of suffering and they sacrifice and toil heavily though even basic amenities and luxuries are denied to them.

According to the Statistical Outline of India 2000-01, the employment of labour in April 1997 was 389.7 million as compared to 283.2 million in July 1983. Nevertheless, the unemployed labour force also increased from 5.9 million in 1983 to 7 million in 1997. However, organised employment as a per
cent of total employment showed a slow growth of 0.6 percent in 20 years from 7.4 per cent in 1973 to 8 per cent in 1984. As far as the construction activity is concerned, there are a greater proportion of unorganised labourers employed when compared to other activities. It has been shown that there were 1161 thousand organised labourers engaged in construction activity in 1981 consisting of 1089 thousand in public sector and 72 thousand in private sector, as compared to 1183 thousand workers in 1998 comprising 1109 thousand in public sector and 74 thousand in private sector. It is estimated that more than 1 crore unorganised workers were employed in construction activity in India in 1998. The total size of construction workers engaged in construction activity in 1981 (1981 Census) was 38.64 lakhs. The total workers accounted for construction activity in Chennai was 1 lakh in 1981, which increased to more than 3 lakhs in 1998. The proportion of women workers engaged in construction activity in Chennai City accounts for more than 20 per cent of the total construction workers.

The nature and extent of construction activity vary from city to city based on the demand for houses and commercial and industrial buildings along with the availability of building contract, supply and demand for unskilled labour, extent of migration and other socio-economic activities. Generally, unskilled labourers prefer regular jobs in factories, offices, etc., but if such avenues are not in their vicinity, they finally resort to construction activities. This is because of the fact that construction activity is not only intermittent and casual in nature but also it involves hard and arduous physical labour. Various research studies have reported that a majority of the
construction workers hail from rural areas especially in the category of masonry.

In general, private contractors undertake most of the construction activities in urban areas. Big construction companies and main contractors undertake the construction work of larger projects. They further sub-contract the work to different small contractors. Expenditure on labour constitutes a substantial portion of the construction cost that can be minimised by exploiting the informal construction workers. In Chennai City, most of the construction workers migrate from the neighbouring districts, whereas in Delhi and Mumbai, they are drawn from various states of India.

Incorporated construction companies undertake most of the big construction projects. The slowing down of labour absorption in these companies has been on the increase. This is being further reinforced by globalisation and liberalisation policies. Some of the internationally reputed construction companies in Chennai City distribute work to different sub-contractors who carry out construction activities with the help of informal construction workers. One of the important characteristics of employment in construction companies is that muster rolls are not maintained up-to-date. Generally, attendance registers are not properly maintained because attendance at the work sites does not exceed 20, enabling them to wriggle out of the purview of the contract labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act of 1970.

The demand for labour in construction industry fluctuates quite frequently according to the season and stages of construction activity. It is said that most of the construction workers remain unemployed at least 10
days a month and three months a year. The frequency of employment varies from person to person depending on his skill and experience. A majority of the contractors recruit construction workers either directly or through intermediaries such as subcontractors or agents. In urban areas, the work conditions are different from rural areas. The construction companies engaged in large construction projects used to employ labourers till late night without providing any shift to the workers. In general, the informal workers engaged in construction activities get payment for overtime work at ordinary rates unlike those in formal employment. The working conditions of informal construction workers are generally quite pathetic without even drinking water, toilet and washing facilities. The working conditions of the lower category of construction workers like Chithal are beyond comparison. More than 90 per cent of Chithal workers are women and almost all of the women construction workers are Chithals. Women workers do not have any facility to look after their kids. These kids roam around at the worksite, when their parents are at work and their security is at high risk. They are employed in unskilled jobs (Chithals). Just like other informal women workers, construction workers are also vulnerable to numerous forms of exploitation much more than those employed in the formal sector. Those in the informal sector are least benefited from protective labour laws.

Most of the construction workers in Chennai City live in slums or semi-slums. The supply of workers for construction activity is mainly drawn from these slums. Some of the construction workers engaged in contractual construction works have temporary settlements near the construction sites and they are denied the basic facilities of life. They live in the settlements
where the sky is their roof and nothing hides their private life. Since they live near the vicinity of the worksite, employers exploit them by giving some additional work even in their leisure time. In some of the construction projects, living accommodation is provided by the employer which consisted of make-shift huts, mostly without ancillary facilities like kitchen, toilet, bath, etc. There are no drainage facilities in these labour camps.

Many slums in Chennai City have been relocated after the initiation of various developmental projects like Mass Rapid Transport Project (MRTP) and evacuation of slums near educational institutions. The life after relocation for these people became very difficult because they have to travel a long distance everyday between their residence and the worksite. The transport expenditure eats away a large proportion of their wage income.

The economic reforms carried out in different countries after the onset of unipolar world and the initiation of globalisation influenced the social policies of International Labour Organisation (ILO). The ILO has softened socialistic orientation to cover up the social problems of the developing countries. The situation augments their economic interest. Ever since the idea of market economy flourished, there have been tremendous changes in human relations in general and welfare of workers in particular. Construction industry has grown by 4.9 per cent per annum during the IX Plan and the work opportunities increased from 14.7 to 17 million. In this scenario, the problems of construction workers in the informal sector attracted the attention and hence the given study assumes great importance.

Although there are a few studies conducted by the Labour Bureau, "Labour Conditions in the Building and Construction Industry in India" was a
pioneer study, which was conducted as early as in 1954. Another important study is on "The Working and living conditions of Workers in the Building Construction Industry in Delhi," conducted in 1977-78. Even though these studies provide a picture of the general problems encountered by the construction workers in their working, living and social environment, they have failed to unearth the socio-economic conditions of bottom level construction workers who are being exploited by individual employers and contractors in urban areas.

The concept of informal sector originated due to the fact that open unemployment is limited. The theoretical basis of this concept, however, assumes some dichotomy in the urban economy arising out of the dualistic tendencies. Lewis's model (1954) popularised the concept of dualism wherein rural labour, can be lost to cities without any corresponding drop in agricultural output. By paying a constant real wage at subsistence level, the industrialists are able to reinvest a surplus and employ an increasing proportion of the country's labour. The supply of labour to the modern sector is assumed to be unlimited at constant real wages in the model. Fei and Ranis (1964) models based on competitive markets and distinguishing two sectors, failed to explain the failure of the modern sector to promote labour demand in proportion with the increased labour supply. The present day developing countries with their socio-economic conditions, largely, do not confirm to these models. However, the rural labour force migrating to urban centres is not really getting absorbed in the urban industrial sector but is seen as squatters on the roads, living in shanty in most towns, under unhygienic, unsanitary conditions. However, Harris and Todaro (1970) in their model
explain the factors behind rural-urban migration and despite its limitations; the model is able to explain the decision making of the rural migrant in terms of expected gains. Mazumdar (1975) introduced the informal sector into a model in which rural de-population henceforth consisted of two elements: temporary migrants on the one hand, who come to seek employment in the informal sector and the permanent migrants on the other. Thus, formal-informal distinction is the most recent development in dualistic thinking.

The studies undertaken in the field of the unorganised workmen have been very few. The Report of the Royal Commission on Labour (Whitley Commission, 1931) set up by the then British Government in 1929 had a far reaching effect on the Government of India in formulating a galaxy of labour legislations in the country.

The outcome of the deliberations of Indian Labour Conference and Standing Labour Committee has however, mostly covered the organised field. Nevertheless, Whitley Commission’s contribution for the decasualisation of port and dockworkers, who were ever casual in their employment, depending upon the arrival and departure of the vessels. The Whitley Commission's recommendations were instrumental in introducing the labour inspection machinery at the Central and State Levels.

The Report of the Labour Investigation Committee (Rage Committee, 1946), pointed out that when the Royal Commission on labour reported in 1931, the working class in India was neither sufficiently organised nor properly stabilised but in later years there has been a greater concentration of the working class population in industrial areas and this led to the rise of an industrial proletariat in most cities.
The Third Five Year Plan (1964-69), which had taken cognisance of the plight of unorganised labour, had mentioned that while considerable improvements had occurred in the living and working conditions of employees in large and organised industries, the unorganised workers could not improve the same. The National Commission on Labour (Gajendragadkar Commission 1969) had devoted three separate chapters of its Report on "Employment of Women and Children."

The book edited by Dr. Basudeve Sahoo (1990) incorporates some articles on women employment in India which also reflects the picture of women workers, their percentage, their literacy rate, their occupation pattern, trend in women employment, but has not dealt with the problems of unorganised women labour in different sectors. An unpublished study was conducted by Kumari Meena Gupta, Ministry of Labour and Employment (1988), on women labour employed by contractors in the mining belt of Singhbhum district in Bihar, which revealed their large-scale exploitation, including sexual abuses by the contractors.

Bidyut Joshi enumerates the various camps organised in the four States namely, Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan which revealed that after the industrialisation of the country, instead of development, the differentiation between various strata in the society has increased and the upper strata have benefited more. The trickle-down theory that the benefits will percolate to the lower strata has proved wrong.

The VI Five Year Plan had formulated a scheme for the establishment of Inter-State Migrant Labour Board with the observations that lack of employment opportunities have forced many rural workers to migrate
in search of jobs. Special problems of this category of labourers have been
recognised.

The availability of literature with regard to the working and socio-
economic conditions of informal construction workers is very scant and
inadequate. The present study is aimed at eliciting information about the
informal construction workers engaged in various types of construction
activities. The nature of employment and income earning pursuits will
influence their socio-economic conditions. The study focuses its attention on
learning the socio-economic conditions of construction workers in the informal
sector.

Objectives

Given the problem and historical background, the broad objective of
the study is to examine the socio-economic conditions of construction
workers in Chennai City. The broad objective of the study is being supported
by the following definite objectives, i.e.,

(i) to ascertain the socio-economic and demographic composition of
construction workers in Chennai City.

(ii) to assess the pattern of employment and the working and living
conditions, particularly the magnitude and profile of different types of
construction workers like Mason, Pariah, Chithal, Carpenter, Painter,
Plumber and Electrician in Chennai City.

(iii) to evaluate the income earning pursuits, consumption pattern,
savings, indebtedness and possession of assets by construction
workers in Chennai City.
(iv) to analyse the socio-economic correlates on the status of life of the construction workers in Chennai City.

Hypotheses

i. A high incidence of construction workers is found in depressed classes and castes of the society. (i.e., there is no relationship between workers from different communities and different categories of construction workers).

ii. The policies and programmes of the government to ameliorate the social disabilities of unorganised workers are less known to the construction workers.

iii. Stability and regularity of labour market opportunities decide the wage income of the construction workers.

iv. Household income and expenditure are directly proportional to household size.

v. Better status of the life of construction workers depends upon the use of resources to accommodate their needs and activities.

Methodology

Source of Data

The study makes use of both primary and secondary data. The secondary data are elicited from various published and unpublished sources. The published sources are mainly drawn from the Government of India publications such as the Census of India and the National Sample Survey. The study also makes use of international data pertaining to informal sector. The researcher has utilised the British Council, Connemera and University of Madras libraries to collect the necessary data. In addition to this, a great deal
of information pertaining to the study has also been obtained from officials, faculty members and researchers of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Institute of Financial Management Research, Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority, Tamil Nadu Institute for Labour Studies, Tamil Nadu Construction Workers Welfare Board, Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, etc. Since the data from secondary sources are insufficient to verify the objectives of the study, the researcher is to rely heavily on primary data.

A suitable research design has been prepared for the present study. It is the design, which is to be decided before drawing the sample and conducting the fieldwork. The research design pertaining to the study is a combination of descriptive and diagnostic methods.

**Techniques of Data Collection**

For obtaining primary data accurately, it is necessary to conduct the survey for data collection systematically. The enquiry requires a set of predetermined questions and a suitable method for conducting a field survey. Any systematic procedure of sample data collection has to satisfy certain characteristics such as principles of organised investigation, scientific selection of the samples and unbiased recording of data.

The researcher decided on the instruments and tools used in conducting the field survey. A careful decision has been taken to obtain the data from the respondents. It has been decided to use interview schedule method as the most appropriate one for the purpose. The main reason for selecting the schedule method is the inappropriateness of other survey methods such as questionnaire and observation because the respondents
are generally illiterates or semi-literate people. A structured and pre-tested questionnaire has been used to collect data.

Sample Design

The study uses multi-stage sampling in order to select the respondents. The sampling frame consists of the following phases:

At the beginning, the researcher is to select the universe of the study. The universe of the present study is the total number of construction workers in Chennai City. There are different occupational groups who come under the construction workers. For analytical convenience, the categories of Mason, Perial, Chithal, Carpenter, Painter, Plumber and Electrician in Chennai City constitute the universe of the study. The entire universe is classified into three units on the basis of the city administration, viz., South Chennai, Central Chennai and North Chennai.

Multi-stage sampling has been adopted as the sampling technique. The first stage of sampling exercise is the selection of a sample Corporation Division from each divided revenue unit of the city identified by the researcher. Thus three Corporation Divisions have been selected from each revenue unit of the city forming a total of nine-sample Corporation Division from three revenue units. They are selected at random from the list of Corporation Divisions provided by the Corporation of Chennai.

The second stage of sampling is the selection of a sample respondent. For this purpose, a census survey has been conducted in the construction areas of each sample Corporation Division. Thus a list of construction workers of different category has been prepared. The list has been prepared by enumerating the names and addresses of the construction
workers engaged in different construction activities in the sample corporation divisions. Then, the collected names have been arranged in alphabetical order to administer random sampling method. From this list, using the systematic random sampling method, the sample respondents have been obtained. Each category of construction workers is determined on the basis of their respective population. From each revenue units, of the Chennai City, 100 sample construction workers have been selected. Thus, out of the three administrative units, 300 sample respondents have been selected. A few case studies have also been taken for in-depth analysis.

To fill up the schedule, the researcher used enumerators under his direct supervision. The researcher was directly involved in the data collection in order to have direct contact with the workers and their work spots. The researcher has taken sufficient attention in asking the questions and recording the responses. The responses are recorded under the direct supervision of the researcher. Each filled-in questionnaire has been edited, summarised on a master chart and finally has been tabulated.

Statistical Tools

Simple statistical tools such as ratios, average and dispersion measures have been used in the analysis of earnings, expenditure, savings, indebtedness and assets of the construction workers. The $\chi^2$ test, 't' test and ANOVA were used to test the significance of the hypotheses.

The actual interviewing lasted for about six months in the first half of 2001. The information sought through the interview schedules include:

i. Identification particulars.

ii. Personal and household characteristics of the respondent.
iii. Migration particulars.
iv. Employment conditions.
v. Health and Family Planning.
vi. Monthly household income.
vii. Monthly household expenditure.
viii. Household savings.
ix. Household Indebtedness.
x. Value of household asset and,
xi. Leisure and Habits.

Limitations

The study does not include all categories of construction workers. It examines only the major category of construction workers such Mason, Peral, Chithal, Painter, Carpenters, Plumber and Electrician and leaves out the other categories. The formal sector employees in the construction industry are excluded because the inferences cannot be generalised for all categories of construction workers.

The plan of the study

The present study consists of seven chapters. The introductory chapter of the study highlights the problem in perspective, objectives, methodology, statistical techniques and tools used in data collection and the outline of the study. The second chapter deals with the urban informal workers in India. It starts with the definition and evolution of informal employment, moves on to the contrast between urban formal and informal workers, general problems of labour, trade union movement, the role of
International Labour Organisation and growth of informal sector and employment in the context of globalisation.

The third chapter gives the details of urbanisation, population growth, and housing of the unorganised construction workers in Chennai City. The fourth chapter explains the profile of construction workers in Chennai City. The nature and extent of employment of construction workers in their attempt to earn an income to meet the essential requirements of life is examined in the fifth chapter. The six chapter analyses the socio-economic correlates of the status of life of the construction workers in Chennai City. The concluding chapter summarises the main findings of the study and offers a few suggestions.

END NOTES