Labour Supply Chains in the Construction Industry in Bengaluru: Evolving Employment and Welfare Dynamics
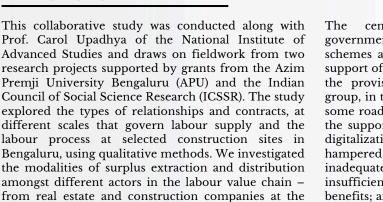
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This collaborative study was conducted along with Prof. Carol Upadhya of the National Institute of Advanced Studies and draws on fieldwork from two research projects supported by grants from the Azim Premji University Bengaluru (APU) and the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). The study explored the types of relationships and contracts, at different scales that govern labour supply and the labour process at selected construction sites in Bengaluru, using qualitative methods. We investigated the modalities of surplus extraction and distribution amongst different actors in the labour value chain – from real estate and construction companies at the top to workers at the bottom, who are connected through diverse and shifting types of intermediaries and contracts.

We also explored the implementation and outcomes of recent initiatives in India for the social protection of migrant workers. Although the construction industry in India is now dominated by a few big companies, it continues to rely on a largely unregulated and fluid migrant labour market and on informal contracting to fulfill its labour requirements. In booming cities such as Bengaluru, large-scale construction projects utilize large numbers of short-term, long-distance migrant workers.

The central government and several state governments have also introduced a range of new schemes and initiatives aimed at the protection and support of (especially inter-state) migrant workers and the provision of social welfare measures for this group, in the post-Covid context. The study identifies some roadblocks in the current policy framework for the support of migrant workers and its emphasis on digitalization. First, the efficacy of welfare schemes is hampered by poor design of platforms and software; inadequate technical literacy of government workers; insufficient staff and resources; non-portability of benefits; and the inability of many migrant workers to access the documents and technologies used by these schemes.

Second, the implementation of welfare schemes and compliance with labour regulations are both heavily reliant on NGOs and other intermediaries, magnifying the scope for slippages or errors in data collection and entry. Third, digital registration in the relevant database has emerged as a proxy for welfare itself, diluting the required focus on increasing the delivery of benefits. Finally, workers often find themselves lost amidst a plethora of 'labour cards', with scant awareness about their utility, or unable to claim benefits.

Labour camps in construction sites

Labour camps in construction sites

Labour contractor and his site supervisor settling weekly accounts

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