

# Advocating for the Rights of Construction Workers: Nirman's Experience

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'Nirman' is a field action project of the College of Social Work, Mumbai, which has evolved over the years in its approach and strategies. This paper presents the characteristics of the construction workers who are predominantly migrant workers and the intervention strategies that Nirman has adopted to facilitate the reach out of public services to workers on the one hand, and workers awareness of their rights to improve access and utilisation.

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The building and construction industry is the second largest absorber of the bulk of the Indian labour force in the unorganised sector. According to the 1991 census (India, 1991), the total labour force in India is estimated to be 317 million, in which the organised sector employs only 26.8 million (8.5 per cent) while the unorganised sector employs as many as 29.02 million (91.5 per cent). As defined by the International Labour Office (ILO):

construction is one of the principal industries in all countries. It is an industry that has its own unique characteristics, and contributes to almost all developmental programmes. Almost all development projects and programmes in the field of health, education, food production and transport, require construction work and in many cases, this component of the development process is by far the costliest. Hence, it is true to say that construction industry underpins development and provides the brick and mortar of progress.

This industry is characterised by aspects like instability, short duration, wide range of skills, management of complex interactions, uniqueness of products leading to circumstances where blatant exploitation of construction workers takes place. No special concern appears

to have been shown towards these workers either by the Central or State government or trade unions and non-government organisations (NGOs).

Campaigning for the rights of construction workers at the worksite has been a very difficult and extremely frustrating task. If one looks around, one finds that Indian trade unions of all political ideologies, have concentrated on the industrial workers or the organised sector where the workers are employed directly by the principal employer. The stakes are higher and gains in power politics are, therefore, more lucrative. The task of organising them is also easier for they are steady in their employment and fixed in their location. Non-government organisations seem to be shying away from taking up activities for this group as it involves several complicated issues and yield very little concrete long term results.

Before entering into the intricacies of various ways in which the construction workers' rights can be upheld, it is essential to understand the exact nature of the construction industry and the labour force it employs. One also needs to understand who contributes to their misery, by acts of commission and omission.

The construction industry is a highly labour intensive activity absorbing a large number of skilled and unskilled humanpower. In India, the capital invested in the construction industry is much larger than any other industry. Investment made in the construction activity during the first 30 years after Independence was more than the total investment on it during the 150 years of the British rule in India.

The building and construction industry covers a wide spectrum of activities ranging from construction for habitation, institution, commercial and industrial purposes to construction of infrastructures like roads and bridges. They also include construction of large developmental structures like dams, barrages, tunnels, canals, power plants, sewerages, laying of railways, pipelines, cables and ropeways, erection of towers, chimneys, and so on. It also includes demolition and maintenance of structures and services. Moreover, it supports the other closely linked ancillary industries like brick kilns, tile factories, stone quarrying, sand dredging, wood, glass, limestones and paints, cement, steel, electrical constructional fixtures, furnishing and fittings.

### **Some Peculiar Characteristics of the Construction Industry**

1. It is the only industry where the product remains static and the production unit is dynamic. This means that the constructed

- structure remains static and the whole unit involved in construction process moves to the new site.
2. The construction process is of a complex nature and functions in multilayers or multiphases. Each layer or phase involves a different set of skilled and unskilled labour.
  3. Although the industry is labour intensive, the principal employer remains totally invisible to a labourer on the site. The whole process of employment ensures that the labourers are hired for a short duration and is never aware who the main employer is.
  4. In the absence of satisfactory regulatory requirements, entry into the building and construction industry is relatively easy. Moreover, capital required for entry into the business is not of the same magnitude as required for other industries. There are a large number of small and, big contractors engaged in building and construction activity ranging from a one-man team to a multi-crore company employing hundreds of persons. Predictably, the birth and mortality rates of contracting firms are very high.
  5. The industry is also characterised by a general lack of training facilities. The vast majority of workers, mostly women, remain unskilled with hardly any scope of skill improvement and those who acquire skills use a method of informal apprenticeship with other skilled workers. Construction-specific technical training or contractor training programmes, or, for that matter, even an inventory of skills required in this industry is missing or conspicuous by their absence.

### **Recruitment of Construction Workers**

The construction workers mostly are of two categories: migrant labour from the same state or other states and local labour available in the slums. The construction industry absorbs construction workers in two ways:

1. Direct entry to the construction site with a *mukadam* (leader/overseer). The construction sites involving a long drawn process of construction particularly employ migrants who come in groups and are willing to stay on the site.
2. Employment through open labour market. These are local labourers, both skilled and unskilled, who make themselves available on a daily basis by waiting at the market place, known

as *nakas*. They offer their labour to the prospective employer or contractor. They rarely take up work on the construction sites. They are hired mainly in repairing and maintenance of old constructed buildings and such smaller activities.

### **Plight of Construction Workers**

The plight of the construction workers, specially the migrant labour, draws our attention here. Usually the migrant workers are brought from their native place by a petty contractor called *mukadam* — the person is usually from the same place and sometimes belongs to the same kinship. The *mukadam* is given the responsibility to bring labourers by the main contractor. For this service of providing labour, he receives commission which he supplements with funds meant for the workers (Joshi, 1987).

Although, most trades in the construction industry are covered under the Minimum Wages Act, the workers do not receive the minimum wages. Often the principal employer does not pay it and usually the contractor deducts his cuts from the wages.

The work timings of the workers are long and uncertain. Since the workers stay on the site, they are available for work round the clock. Most of the workers are not paid wages, as such; they are paid *kharchi*, that is subsistence allowance after every seven or fifteen days. The final account is settled only after culmination of the work for the season. No document is given to the workers to show that they are engaged for work, or what wages they have earned, or how much they have to recover from the employers. They are cheated rampantly. The safety measures are minimal and many times remain unused. If the working conditions are bad, the living conditions of these workers are even worse. Their housing consists of make shift sheds. There is usually limited and uncertain access to drinking water. Latrines are rarely provided.

Food and other necessities are even more expensive for the migrants than for local workers. Often, being from another state, they have no ration cards and have to buy food and provisions in small quantities, which works out to be costlier.

It is essential to also look at the construction workers' problem with a gender perspective. If the conditions are bad for male construction workers, women suffer doubly or more than that. Women bear the triple burden of work, home and children. Women are employed in almost all the work related to the construction process, from foundation

work to masonry and beyond. Women's work is mostly categorised as unskilled and avenues for skill upgradation are almost non-existent. Women help in carrying debris dug up at the excavation stage, carry various types of building material, help in the erection of scaffolding, and curing the floor by keeping it wet till it sets. At times, the wives of male skilled workers work as assistants to their husbands. Since women do not have a well defined role to play and absolutely no chance to take up skilled tasks, their work is treated as menial, non-essential and of the lowest nature in the whole process. They are paid less and face more job insecurities than men (Cherian and Prasad, 1995).

### **Workers' Rights?**

Rights can be divided into two categories. One is the right as a citizen enshrined in the Constitution. The other is the right endowed through various Acts to any person who works for his/her livelihood. Construction workers, due to the peculiarity of their pattern of employment, remain out of the purview of both sets of rights. Campaigning for their rights has to emerge from a perspective that identifies the factors that hinder the exercise of their rights.

The Constitution gives every citizen the right to vote. Construction workers do not get to vote due to various problems like migration and the temporary nature of stay. Communities of construction workers are never counted as vote banks. This is also the reason for political leaders keeping away from the issues related to construction workers.

There are various public services meant for all the citizens of India, and there are special programmes for the poor. The construction workers cannot avail of any of these facilities. Some of the facilities/rights available to every citizen are unfortunately denied to construction workers.

### ***Public Distribution Services***

Fair price shops are basically meant for people falling below the poverty line. Construction workers form a large population earning less than subsistence level. None of the workers can avail the facility of the ration card due to various reasons. There is no provision of temporary ration cards to the workers for the duration of stay on the site. This is also not immediately possible as workers cannot prove their identity as a migrant labourer since they are invariably not legally registered. The contractor is unwilling to cooperate as the provision of ration card is one way of recognising the status of workers. The ration

card in recent times has come to be seen as an extremely important document of identity to every citizen in India. In the absence of a ration card, a worker remains an invisible entity.

The implication of this is felt more by the women. Their major time goes in locating the nearest grocery and managing food items within the restricted budget. Cooking fuel in the open market is expensive.

### *Health Facilities (Public Health Service)*

Public hospitals are meant for poor patients. Health problems are the constant recurring phenomenon of the construction workers' life. It is a fact that Public Health Facilities do not have any kind of model which caters to this labour force. The health services are inaccessible to workers on the site. The OPD timings are not designed for the unorganised sector workers. There are very few mobile health clinics and they function at totally unsuitable timings. The local Primary Health Centres or Urban Health Centres do not have any special health package for the construction workers. The mobile health clinics, if available, may not be accessible to workers at the right place and the right time. Major health programmes like immunisation drives, family health programmes, malaria eradication programmes, and so on never reach the construction workers on the site.

Women bear the major brunt in the health area. Their health deteriorates due to the triple burden of work, home and children. Besides this, due to lack of access to the public hospitals or nursing homes, majority of the women deliver their babies at home. Frequent childbirths interspersed with miscarriages resulting from the hard and heavy work definitely takes its toll.

### *Educational Facilities*

Universalisation of 'Primary Education by 2000 AD' is also the most popular slogan. Still, the educational services of government and NGO sectors do not have any alternative model of the education for the construction workers. The children are forced to remain out of education arena sealing their future as unskilled or semiskilled construction workers.

### *Banking Facilities*

Construction workers today are totally out of the purview of the banking system. Irregularity in payment of wages, and the hand to mouth situation perpetuated by the contractor, keeps construction

worker away from saving habits. The banks also do not have any kind of schemes which will cater to these mobile construction workers. Several Group Insurance Schemes, Saving Schemes, and Loan Facilities meant for the poor are denied to the construction worker as he/she cannot prove his/her identity.

Any fight or campaign for the rights of the workers will be futile without considering the above given rights. The second dimension of understanding the issue of rights is the worker's right as a labourer. There are several acts applicable to the the construction workers. Overall 27 labour laws are applicable to construction industry. None of the provisions or measures are implemented. Taking advantage of the worker's vulnerability as a migrant and temporary worker, the social security measures and other welfare programmes meant as a part of the worker's rights never get implemented.

There exists a plethora of labour laws, regulating work in the construction industry. Some of the important legislations applicable to construction workers are:

- Minimum Wages Act, 1948.
- Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970.
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.
- Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972.
- Interstate Migrant Workmen (Ref... of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979.
- Employee's Provident Fund Act, 1952.
- Employees State Insurance Act, 1948.

Violations of labour laws applicable to construction workers are all too common. What varies is the nature and extent of violation. In actual practice, the workers in the construction industry are totally neglected, hapless and helpless. Women are exploited to the maximum limit. The invisible nature of the principal employer and the existing contract system has facilitated the neglect. The nature of the industry, the shifting employer-employee relationship, the seasonal and discontinual nature of employment have resulted in the bulk of these workers being denied their rights and benefits.

Women working under the category of unskilled labour never get the fruits of the Maternity Benefit Act. They are also victims of gender discrimination. Women are never paid minimum wages and are also underpaid violating the Equal Remuneration Act. Creche facilities are provided only where NGOs like Mobile Creches come forward.

Contractors never take the initiative to provide anything like a creche for children.

Women work till their day of delivery which mostly takes place on the site under the supervision of older women or the *mukadam*'s wife. She rejoins work a few days after delivery. The child is left in the care of older siblings or in a shade on the site by itself. She barely gets a break to feed her child or to regain her health.

Another area of concern is the high accident rate in the industry. Even though there are extensive safety guidelines and codes prescribed regarding operations such as excavating, blasting operations, erection of pre-fabricated parts, working on heights and on towers, use of scaffolds, safety belts, ladders, and so on workers continue to work unguided, unaware of hazards and saving themselves only by instinct or intuition. Since they are constantly under the threat of unemployment, the workers primary concern is to earn as much as possible, even at great personal risk. The contractor does not implement any of the prescribed procedures to ensure the safety of the workers. As a result workers suffer chronic health problems which can be termed as occupation health hazards. Besides these, a number of accidents do take place. Most of the accidents, including the fatal ones, do not always get reported to the authorities concerned. Workers rarely get compensation. A worker not only loses his/her job, but also has no means to subsist or sustain himself/ herself during the period of incapacitation. In the case of accidents, the normal reaction of the contractor is to disown responsibility or to get away from it. In case he cannot get away, he would try to hush up the matter by paying some money to the family or shifting the victim to the hospital. Many times the affected person lies in the hospital with helpless relatives or alone without any kind of follow up by the contractor. Sometimes he/she may die due to lack of timely financial and medical aid (Davala, 1994).

### **Efforts in Campaigning for the Rights of the Construction Workers**

Unionisation or campaigning for the rights of the construction workers is an uphill task. There are very few organisations and trade unions today in this field. Trade unions have played a role in campaigning for the rights of workers in the organised sector. However, construction workers do not form a popular target group for unionising. Some organisations like 'Mobile Creches' have attempted to provide welfare services like creches and education for this group. Except for some

notable initiatives undertaken by the 'Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat', 'Tamil Nadu Manila Katida Thozhildar Sangham' and few trade unions in other cities, the scenario at the national level has been dismal. The only praiseworthy effort at the national level has been the formation of the National Campaign Committee For Construction Labour set up in 1985, and National Federation for Construction Labour set up by various construction workers' organisations — both non-political and political; concerned individuals such as lawyers and activists; and a large number of construction workers from all over the country. A model bill and a scheme was drafted by this Committee.

## **Nirman**

Why is unionisation or organisation of workers in the construction industry so difficult? The obvious reasons could be listed as:

1. The labour force is fragmented in terms of regions, languages, skills and locations of work. They do not form a homogeneous group.
2. The labour force, though large in size, is always employed in smaller groups and for short durations. This leaves very little time for coming together.
3. The cost of the labour force, especially on the site, consists of poor migrants. Illiteracy and a feudal relationship with the contractor makes them vulnerable and fearful of seeking or accepting external help.
4. The isolation of workers is systematically perpetuated as the workers stay on the site and remain alienated from the local population.
5. The principal employer, contractors and *mukadams* keep a close watch on the workers and do not encourage any outsider attempting to work on any issue. It is sometimes difficult to even collect information or talk to construction workers.

In spite of all this, some NGOs have tried working out some viable models of intervention which, in a way, has helped in campaigning for the rights of the construction workers. One such NGO is 'Nirman', an organisation working in Mumbai for 10 years.

Nirman, a project for migrant construction workers was initiated in 1986 by the College of Social Work, Mumbai, as a field action project for social work students. Its foundational work was built through the field experiences of faculty members and students at the Mobile Creches, a social work agency for the welfare of the children of

construction workers. The main thrust of Nirman has been to develop strategies and models of intervention so that the rights of the workers can be protected. The work of Nirman can be divided into three phases.

### *Phase 1*

This was the initial phase where Nirman adopted a non-controversial approach. The objective was to develop rapport with the construction workers through welfare activities and also study various problems of the construction worker. The attempt in this phase was to explore the living conditions of construction workers and study the dynamics of the construction industry. Through programmes like pre-school education, adult education, health education and recreational activities, the organisation was able to establish rapport on few sites. This phase was typically marked with geographical area-wise intervention with the aim of understanding the nature of the exploitative system. The strong need for bringing workers from different sites together was felt. Some attempts were made in this direction. The seeds of developing a trade union for the workers was sowed in this phase. The first phase took four years.

### *Phase 2*

This phase was marked by intense work with construction workers and the launching of a trade union movement. The objective in this phase was to identify specific issues and mobilise workers to fight for their rights.

### *Formation of Nirman Mazdoor Sanghatna (NMS)*

In 1990, while working on one of the government sites in Mumbai, the workers from the site expressed their problems such as non-payment of minimum wages and equal wages for equal work. Nirman felt the need to organise these workers in campaigning for their right to 'just' wages. The Nirman Mazdoor Sanghatna, a trade union, was launched while fighting on this issue. The new union could obtain a stay order from the court and file a petition which resulted in job security to some extent, assuring of minimum wages and equal wages. Nirman also entered the area of *naka* workers or street corner labourers in this phase. The welfare activities for adults and children were also continued in the same areas. Through the Mazdoor Sanghatna, Nirman was able to get some basic amenities like water, toilet, electricity, and so on, on some sites.

The Nirman Mazdoor Sanghatna brought up a lot of difficult issues to the fore. The need for legal expertise was strongly felt. The sustenance of motivation of the workers proved to be a very difficult task. The opposition of the builder and the contractor resulted in physical threats to the Nirman activists and of the Nirman Mazdoor Sanghatna. Gradually the workers' active participation in the Nirman Mazdoor could be seen waning. Lack of proper infrastructure and a broader base of labour force was acutely felt. Nirman, as an NGO, tried to sustain the trade union for four gruelling years. In 1994, the Sanghatna was registered under the Trade Union Act of 1926, and had separated from the parent body, Nirman. One of the activists took the responsibility of running the union. Presently, the union is still grappling with the legal tangles of the case filed in 1990 and attempting to take up similar issues.

Nirman did not limit itself to micro-level interventions but also reached out at the macro-level for policy changes. Nirman campaigned with other interested organisations, trade unions and concerned individuals for a central legislation for construction workers. One of its venture has been to initiate and support the National Campaign Committee for Central Legislation and (NCC-CL) and the National Federation of Construction Labourers (NFCL). One of the major demands of NCC-CL is the formation of Tripartite Construction Labour Boards to regulate employment conditions of workers. The Board aims at:

- compulsory registration of the employers and the employee;
- equitable distribution of work, resources and responsibility; and
- regulation of employees working conditions and the inclusion of benefits, minimum wages and social security for the employees.

Another part of campaigning has been to conduct intense research and develop rich documentation on the construction industry. In the year 1993, a study on Open Labour Market (*naka* workers) in Mumbai was conducted with the help of the Labour Department. The study was published by the then Labour Commissioner. The study was found to be informative as it reached the various labour organisations, institutions, libraries and NGOs.

### **Phase 3 (Present Stage)**

This phase is marked by intense soul searching and dialogue by the staff of Nirman and the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, with a view in shaping Nirman as a sensitive body responding to the needs of the construction workers.

As the Nirman Mazdoor Sanghatna became an independent body, Nirman decided to develop a fresh approach whereby issues could be tackled both at the micro- and macro-level in a more comprehensive way. It was strongly felt that research and documentation in this unorganised sector was severely lacking. Hence, in 1995, Nirman initiated a research study on 'Socio-Demographic and Health Profile of Construction Workers on the Construction Sites of New Bombay'. The study with the active support of City Industrial and Development Corporation (CIDCO), the town planning and implementation body of Navi Mumbai, was for purposes of assessment and gaining entry. While the study was in process, Nirman entered into a kind of reflection and rethinking regarding intervention strategies adopted to date. The experiences revealed that the organisation of workers cannot happen in a social vacuum. The construction workers need to be made visible to the various service sectors, government machinery and general masses. It became obvious that it is futile organising and struggling for worker's rights without developing models of interventions which are workable. Nirman, as an NGO, set out to help building the bridge between various services and workers, needs, with the aim to boost the morale of the workers.

A valuable relationship was also built with the managers, engineers and builders. Based on the needs which were either expressed by the workers and also observed by the Nirman staff, certain activities were taken up. These activities later took a concrete shape with well-thought out intervention strategies, with the following objectives:

- Developing different models of problem solving intervention with construction workers.
- Creating a network of supportive programmes involving various government and non-governmental organisations to address different needs of the construction workers.
- Networking with various government and non-governmental agencies at the micro- and macro- level to advocate for suitable policies and programmes.
- Creating a strong data-base by conducting research and collecting extensive information related to this field.

Some of the observations during the study were as follows:

1. In the area of health, Navi Mumbai has a health set up initiated by Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation (NMMC). It has a hospital, urban health centres, primary health centre, mother and child health clinics in different nodes which provide all the

health facilities to the public at minimal cost. They also have a separate Malaria Eradication Cell. During the study, it was observed that there are two mobile health vans supposed to be covering some construction sites but were in the process of being discontinued. Malaria eradication workers did not cover all the sites routinely. This means that construction workers were totally out of the purview of Navi Mumbai's health set up. The study also brought out this point strongly that construction workers were totally at the mercy of the private doctors. Some of the larger construction sites also boasted of doctors appointed by the builder. They gave negligible health services to the workers. An immunisation drive in 1995 did not have any separate programme for covering construction sites spread all over Navi Mumbai.

2. Occupational health hazards were the most neglected area. On many sites, construction workers barely used any safety equipments. Many sites did not even have first aid kits. The workers and even engineers were totally ignorant of the first aid information necessary in the case of accidents. A visit to the public hospital in Navi Mumbai revealed that construction workers who were accident victims were left unattended by the contractors. It is not rare to find accident victims, who are alone in Mumbai, dying in the hospital and their bodies remaining unclaimed. The contractor fails to enquire at the hospital or intimate the relatives.
3. Navi Mumbai has some Zilla Parishad schools attached to some villages. But construction workers children are rarely enrolled in any of the schools. The Mobile Creche project functions only on some sites and caters to very few families.

Health, therefore, was one area where an intervention model was necessary. The Nirman staff realised that workers can avail of all the health facilities available through government and non-government sources, provided these facilities are remodelled and redesigned to suit the needs of the workers. This meant a three pronged approach. The NMMC health set up required to be sensitised towards the special needs of the workers so that public health services reached construction workers more effectively. At the same time, it was essential to work with the workers and provide them with information so that they could actively participate in availing the facilities. The third approach was to work with the employers, both builders and the petty contractors

as well as engineers, and managers so that they could also see their role in providing health facilities to the workers on the site itself. Based on this approach, the following activities were undertaken since 1995 with the NMMC health department:

1. The NMMC health department was persuaded to extend the 'National Immunisation Drive' to the construction workers' children.
2. The Mother and Child Health Centre at Turbhe and Nirman jointly organised a special medical camp on a Sunday in the year 1997 for women and children of 'Mass Housing Construction Site'. At present Nirman is trying to organise regular programmes with Mother and Child Health Centres so that some programmes for construction workers can be taken up by the health centre for regular implementation.
3. The local PHC 'Mobile Van' meant for the construction sites were being underutilised. An attempt was made to create an awareness of this facility among workers on one site and help them to utilise these services.
4. Initially a few specific malaria detection camps were organised involving local PHCs. Today the PHCs regularly conduct malaria detection camps on the sites taking very little help from Nirman.
5. In the year 1997 and 1998, two to three areas like malaria awareness, AIDS awareness and reproductive health related activities for women were taken up. After one or two programmes the NMMC staff and the malaria detection staff have expressed willingness to take help from Nirman and conduct similar programmes independently. This has gone a long way in the detection of cases and follow up.

Intervention with the NMMC was a long and arduous process. Initially the Nirman staff faced scepticism and resistance. The Medical Health Officer and the Assistant Medical Health Officer were the first people who got convinced with the ideas. Simultaneously, the local PHC staff were contacted on regular basis. Programmes conducted by Nirman were like demonstrations for the NMMC to design their intervention for construction workers. The professional social workers of the public hospital at Vashi were also involved in some programmes. This process, initiated by Nirman, yielded results. Till 1996 Nirman could enter only the construction sites under CIDCO. From 1997 onwards, Nirman was able to enter private sites due to NMMC health

department's collaboration. Today, construction workers' health issues are identified by Nirman and solutions are worked out in such a way that NMMC can take them up on a long term basis.

### **Activities with Workers**

Various activities were taken up with workers directly. This involved organising a first aid training programme, malaria awareness and AIDS awareness programmes. On one of the sites, a workers group enthused by the information given, developed their own first aid box which was emulated by some other construction workers' groups. These training programmes were accompanied by special medical camps to detect occupational diseases. Besides malaria, other problems like hydrocil among men were identified and dealt with.

Oven a period of time, Nirman staff has realised that orientation visits to all the government facilities available in the vicinity need to be organised on a regular basis. This is a major step in bringing workers out of their isolated status. The workers gain confidence to take decisions about treatment independently. This also means breaking one of the chains tying them to the contractor.

Snowball effect of such activities could be seen on many sites. Workers could be seen taking up accident cases more assertively even to the extent of stopping work for better bargaining in compensation cases.

In this process, builders and contractors have played a passive role. They allow Nirman staff to take up activities and on many sites they welcome such activities. The scepticism and antagonism is less as the issue is related to health. On one site the construction company felt pressurised enough by the medical camp results to appoint one more lady doctor for women.

### **Other Intervention Attempts**

1. Similar interventions are being tried out in the area of skill upgradation of the workers. The Nirman staff is playing an active role in identifying several skill areas and approaching the existing training institutes to design programmes suitable to the construction workers' needs. At present a few training programmes are being planned with the Shramik Vidyapeeth and the National Institute for Construction Management and Research.

2. The Nirman staff has also been able to work with a nearby Zilla Parishad school, on one of the sites. Joint meetings were organised involving construction workers, their children and teachers of Zilla Parishad, to work out viable education pattern for these children.
3. An attempt is also being made to extend the Apna Bazaar Cooperative Market Mobile Van Service to the site so that workers can get better food items at cheaper rates. Besides this, the Nirman staff is aiming at introducing ration cards for the construction workers, at least on a temporary basis.
4. On one site the Nirman staff was able to work with one bank and help some workers in opening their accounts. This was an uphill task but was very much appreciated by workers. In future, the plan is to introduce various group insurance facilities and other financial schemes so that workers can free themselves from the clutches of money lenders who are generally the contractors.
5. Various cultural programmes, outings and even sports competitions have helped in bringing workers of different states together and also reduced the tension between the engineers, contractors and workers.

## **Conclusion**

Campaigning for the rights of the construction workers will be effective and yield results if the construction workers actively participate in the process. The construction workers need to be brought out of their helpless, isolated state and to be able to think independently. Several issues like health, education and skill upgradation need to be tackled not as welfare activities but as part of the campaign for the rights at their workplace. Struggles for better wages, and better working conditions cannot yield result only by formation of trade unions or cooperatives. Thus, viable, workable solutions must be evolved. Non-governmental organisations like Nirman can play an active role in developing demonstrative models of intervention which can be adopted by the governmental agencies and the construction companies. The trade union movement will gain impetus in the unorganised sector only if such NGO interventions take place. The actual participation of workers at all levels in organising is possible if they have an informed choice, they are not fearful of the contractors and can draw strength from the broader base of labour force.

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