

12. Migrant Workers and Digital Inclusion in the Construction Sector in India

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Abstract

COVID-19 left the world on the brink of a humanitarian crisis, and brought to the fore the deep-seated problems of the weak and the vulnerable—migrant populations in the Global South. In India, while governments across states have justified their efforts in addressing migrants' issues, their plight was a culmination of an already complacent system—with a lack of inclusivity. Employing a stakeholder approach, this study explores the precarity of migrants engaged in the construction sector in India, contextualizing their “engagement/dis-engagement” with technology as they attempt to access government welfare schemes amidst the COVID-19 crisis. While factors determining access to digital tools have been explored, the potential of such tools in addressing their concerns has been discussed. This study drew on interviews with heads of labour unions, government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), heads of job match-making platforms, and the director of a construction company, to build a deeper understanding of their challenges.

Keywords: migrants, digital inclusion, construction sector

I was born in Lonavala and raised in Pune, both places located in the western region of India. Some of the vivid memories I have of my childhood include visits to numerous tunnel construction sites in India—Pune-Mumbai Expressway, Konkan Railway, Delhi Metro. My father's infrastructure firm has been in the business of building tunnels for more than thirty-five years, and many of our family trips in the 1990s and early 2000s included such visits. Since most of the sites were away from the city and amid mountains and forests, it was a welcome break from the din and bustle of daily city

life. As a young girl, I used to interact enthusiastically with site supervisors, engineers, and workers, sometimes even accompanying my father deep into the freshly excavated tunnels.

My most recent visit was to a tunnel construction site in Karwar, Karnataka, in December 2019. This site is near an old highway bridge constructed by the British on National Highway 4 (NH-4), dubbed by locals as “London Bridge.” My father’s company was in the middle of a time-bound construction project of a twin tube tunnel for NH-4. There were more than 250 construction workers at the site, most of them migrants from the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. With the announcement of a nationwide lockdown in India due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the news of a mass exodus of workers from different parts of the country started pouring in, making me anxious about the condition of my father’s site at Karwar. Upon returning home from his site, my father gave me a first-hand account of the impact of the pandemic on his site and the nationwide lockdown on the construction sector:

The construction work of tunnels is different from other works as it goes on round the clock and in three shifts per day. On the late evening of 24th March 2020, my mobile phone was ringing constantly. My site engineer was on the phone and he informed me that a nationwide lockdown had just been announced by the Prime Minister. My first reaction to this national emergency was to go to the site immediately (normally I would retire after meditation for half an hour in the evening). I reached the site and as the news had unfolded on media, the workers were agitated and wanted to return home (Personal interview, May 22, 2020).

As my father explained, the news of a sudden lockdown created anxiety and confusion amongst the workers.¹ Some of them had already connected to their families over the phone and were under pressure to return home with their full salaries. The workers were mostly migrants from the state of Odisha and Bihar who worked at the site for six months and then returned to their native homes for farming. These workers had migrated for a better life for their families and were not landless labourers. In their villages, they were engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, but these occupations barely allowed them to eke out a living. They had migrated to the city to take advantage of the higher paying jobs in the construction sector.

1 https://almashines.s3.dualstack.ap-southeast-1.amazonaws.com/assets/media/files/266_1591946871_6f421df109b2fe807ffe16835a024788.pdf

On the one hand, my father was rushing to the government offices to obtain the release of salaries for the workers and staff before the month end; and on the other hand, he was trying to procure a month's supply of ration for those who wished to stay back at the site.

The lockdown was severe, and it was challenging to maintain the supply of ration as law enforcement agencies didn't allow any vehicles to ply. The next day I rushed to the District Collector's office and requested them to issue passes so that we were not obstructed by the law enforcement agencies as we carried rations and medical supplies to the workers (Personal interview, May 22, 2020).

He noted that a month later, the site workers began asking to return home. Some of them had genuine reasons to be home as the monsoon was closing in and they had to look after their agricultural land, for the harvest would feed their families for a year. My father continued: "We hired two private buses. After receiving permission from the government of Karnataka, one left for Odisha and another for Bihar."

The construction industry has been heavily affected by the lack of workers. According to a report in *The Indian Express*, the departure of migrant workers in the last two months had depleted the workforce by almost seventy-five per cent across the different construction sites of Pune Metro, slowing the progress to just about twenty to twenty-five per cent of the usual capacity (Rashid 2020).

Many workers were landholding farmers, who had consciously decided to migrate for better prospects. This dual role of the migrants—as farmers and construction workers—has a potential to disrupt the common perception of them as landless labourers concerned with subsistence. In his essay, "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and The Terms of Recognition," Arjun Appadurai considers the capacity to aspire as a cultural capacity and not just an economic one:

Aspirations certainly have something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations. And because these factors have been assigned to the discipline of economics, to the domain of the market and to the level of the individual actor (all approximate characterizations), they have been largely invisible in the study of culture. To repatriate them into the domain of the culture, we need to begin by noting that aspirations form

parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms (Appadurai 2004, 67; Rao and Walton 2004).

Thus, it becomes important to recognize that migrants are not just victims and disenfranchized, but subjects who have a capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004).

Globally, COVID-19 disrupted the lives of informal workers, particularly migrants, like never before, and brought to the fore some of the deep-seated issues and challenges that they face. In India, while governments across different states have justified their efforts in addressing the migrants' issues, their plight was a result of an already complacent system—with a lack of inclusivity.

Migration studies have highlighted the crucial role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) play in the diversification, the intensity, and the breadth of migrant transnational practices. Empirical studies suggest that low-skilled as well as forced migrants are empowered by the strategic use of ICTs (Diminescu 2002; Gillespie et al. 2016; Smets 2017; Dekker et al. 2018). In the early 2000s, a few empirical studies pointed out the importance of digital technologies as resources for migrants in vulnerable situations, despite persisting inequalities in terms of access, infrastructure, and digital skills (Diminescu 2002; Horst 2006; Nedelcu 2009). However, precarious migrants—i.e., those either with low economic and cultural capital or with irregular/vulnerable migration status taking advantage of digital resources—have generally remained, until recently, an overlooked topic (Leurs and Smets 2018).

Employing a stakeholder approach, this study explores the precarity of migrants engaged in the construction sector in India, contextualizing their “engagement/dis-engagement” with technology as they attempt to access government welfare schemes² amidst the COVID-19 crisis. While the factors determining access to digital tools have been explored, the potential of such tools in addressing their concerns has been discussed. This study drew on interviews with a range of stakeholders such as the heads of labour unions, government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), heads of job match-making platforms, and the director of a construction company, to build a deeper understanding of their challenges.

2 <https://mahakamgar.maharashtra.gov.in/welfare-scheme-for-building-other-construction-workers.htm>

Migrant Labour in the Construction Sector—Key Issues and Challenges

The construction sector is one of the largest employers in India, possibly as elsewhere in the world. The National Sample Survey of India (2016–17)³ puts the number of construction workers in the country at over 74 million. According to the 2001 census,⁴ inter-state migrant workers make 35.4 per cent of all the construction workers in the country's urban areas. Of all the inter-state migrants in India who move out of the farm sector, construction absorbs around 9.8 per cent, making it the second most-preferred sector for migrants after retail. The report "Inclusive by Design: Cementing the Future for Informal Workers in India's Construction Sector" states that about 50 million workers are engaged in construction, which employs the largest number of informal and migrant workers.⁵ Although construction is considered to be one of the principal industries in the country, the workers remain exploited and discriminated against (Mathew 2005). Urban construction is an organized and formal sector, given its substantial share in the national economy, the capital assets that the firms control, and the number of workers they employ. However, it is the labour in the construction sector which is treated as informal because of the form of contract employment and their lack of entitlement to statutory protection and benefits (T.G. Suresh 2010).

Indian labour statistics place construction workers under the category of labour in the unorganized sector. According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector:⁶

unorganized workers consist of those working in the unorganized enterprises or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits, and workers in the formal sector without any employment/social security benefits provided by the employers (NCEUS 2015, 3).

As the construction sector workers are under contractual employment, the workers are inducted into the sector without any formal documentation, the only record being their names entered into the muster roll of their employers. In many cases, these workers do not possess a valid identity card

3 https://mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/o/outcome_budget_2016-17.pdf/obo72481-8553-f606-e97f-2e999bc24c6f?t=1593874248171

4 https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-common/census_data_2001.html

5 <https://www.dasra.org/resource/inclusive-by-design-cementing-the-future-for-informal-workers-in-indias-construction-sector>

6 https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/Condition_of_workers_sep_2007.pdf

given the nature of their work (Varma 2020).⁷ In the absence of a record of their employment or wage and salary slips, the construction worker lacks any formal proof of his labour, an essential and fundamental requirement to enter into a negotiation. The situation becomes grim in case of migrant workers who are usually recruited through private firms and middlemen in the absence of a state-imposed system. They often undergo discrimination and exploitation as the contractors from the “receiving state” usually own the decision-making process, and the migrant labourers are unfamiliar with the socio-cultural fabric of this state (Choolayil and Putran 2021). Thus, the construction worker in the informal sector has little access to labour rights⁸ and the women worker⁹ faces greater discriminatory practices¹⁰ such as lesser wages, non-payment of wages,¹¹ and lack of legally mandated benefits.¹²

Social welfare measures for the construction workers are enshrined in The Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) (BOCW) Act, 1996.¹³ This was a major accomplishment in providing social security and welfare protections to this workforce in India through registration procedures for workers and employers and through the establishment of state-based Welfare Boards. The preamble of the BOCW Act explains:

An act to regulate the employment and conditions of service of building and other construction workers and to provide for their safety, health and welfare measures and for other matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

However, the government implementation of these policies is largely non-existent and few construction workers across India receive any of the benefits described in law (Srivastava and Jha 2016; Pattenden 2016).

7 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8276029/#CR73>

8 Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). <https://www.sewa.org/>

9 <https://hr.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/workplace-4-o/diversity-and-inclusion/informal-women-workers-in-indias-construction-sector-earn-30-40-less-than-their-male-counterparts-report/87411569>

10 https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=lrc_pubs

11 Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). <https://www.wiego.org/>

12 <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152151101800204>

13 <https://labour.gov.in/whatsnew/building-and-other-construction-workers-regulation-employment-and-conditions-service-act>

The hardship faced by the migrants in India¹⁴ during their journey from cities to villages during the pandemic has been well-documented¹⁵ in the media.¹⁶ Though many steps¹⁷ were taken by the central, state, and local governments¹⁸ in India to provide relief in the form of special “Shramik” trains (a special train service in India to move migrant workers stranded due to the lockdown) (Saluja 2020), free food grains,¹⁹ cash transfers,²⁰ and employment opportunities,²¹ an interview with V. Prameela, who heads the migrant workers’ project in Bengaluru for the NGO, Sampark, points out the deep-seated issues that surfaced during the pandemic due to the low registration rates of the workers. She argues,

Unawareness regarding the benefits of welfare funds is the main reason for low registration. [...] When we started our work in the year 2013, even the developers or builders were unaware of the motive behind the one per cent cess [tax/levy] under the BOCW Welfare Cess Act, 1996²² that was required to be paid to government. If this is the developer’s plight, the plight of the workers is unimaginable (Personal interview, October 13, 2020).²³

Prameela spoke of an estimated amount of INR 8,000 crore (\$1.081 billion) remaining unutilized in Karnataka’s state welfare board. She stated that in the case of the migrant workers, lack of awareness about the registration process was the main reason for their low registration numbers.

This issue of low registration of the workers in India has been the main reason for their ineligibility for receiving bailout money or cash transfers from the government. Telephonic interviews with 3,196 migrant construction

14 <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/newsfeed/2020/04/indian-migrant-workers-sprayed-disinfectant-chemical-200406104936658.html>

15 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52093220>

16 <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/row-over-buses-for-migrants-uttar-pradesh-congress-president-priyanka-gandhi-vadras-personal-secretary-booked-for-cheating-and-forgery-8385211.html>

17 <https://www.firstpost.com/india/left-led-kerala-govt-will-be-first-in-country-to-provide-insurance-free-medical-treatment-for-migrant-workers-3416142.html>

18 <https://www.news18.com/news/india/up-govt-transferred-rs-1000-to-over-10-lakh-states-migrant-workers-cm-yogi-adityanath-2668445.html>

19 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/fm-announces-free-foodgrains-for-8-crore-migrant-workers-for-2-months/articleshow/75738241.cms?from=mdr>

20 <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1633546>

21 <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1634566>

22 <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1996-28.pdf>

23 For more, see p. 2 of BOCW Cess Act.

workers from north and central India between March 27–29, 2020, conducted by another NGO, Jan Sahas, found that ninety-four per cent of the interviewed workers did not have BOCW cards, making them ineligible for any transfer. Further, fourteen per cent did not have ration cards and seventeen per cent did not have bank accounts (Trivedi 2020). Clearly, not every BOCW is registered with the Welfare Boards and not every registered BOCW has benefitted from cash transfers.

In India, the criteria for registration are determined by the state governments (Building and Other Workers {Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service} Act, 1996). For example, in Delhi, a certificate from a registered trade union suffices to get a construction worker registered with the state BOCW Welfare Board, while for a worker in Uttar Pradesh, a builder's certificate specifying that they were involved with the construction activity for ninety days in the last twelve months is required. Often the builders/contractors do not issue such certificates, making workers ineligible for registration with the board. In Delhi, the labour department last year made the registration process more extensive, requiring every applicant to fill out a twelve-page form. In addition, many workers routinely fall off the safety net due to their inability to stick to the compulsory annual renewal. For example, the number of registered construction workers in Delhi fell from over 300,000 to 40,000 between 2015 and 2020 (Barman 2020).

In order to address this issue, the central government in India has planned multiple welfare measures,²⁴ including: fast-tracking the registration of the left-out workers; nation-wide portability of benefits through the One Nation, One Ration Card scheme;²⁵ universalization of social security schemes on health insurance through Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojna (PM-JAY);²⁶ life insurance cover through Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY);²⁷ disability insurance cover through Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY);²⁸ life-long pension during old age through Pradhan Mantri Shram-Yogi Maandhan Yojana (PM-SYM);²⁹ and provisions for transit accommodations in large cities.

24 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/india-s-migrant-construction-workers-an-analysis-of-their-welfare-framework-79551>

25 <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/one-nation-one-ration-card-system-explained-6410179/>

26 <https://pmjay.gov.in/>

27 <https://licindia.in/Home/Pradhan-Mantri-Jeevan-Jyoti-Bima-Yojana>

28 <https://nationalinsurance.nic.co.in/en/about-us/pradhan-mantri-suraksha-bima-yojana>

29 <https://maandhan.in/shramyogi>

However, there could be several hits and misses in implementation of these schemes in the absence of proper data on migrant registry. An intent-impact gap would thus be created in access to these welfare measures planned by the government. In his interview, the General Secretary of Construction Workers Federation of India, V. Sashikumar cited that the reforms of the government could be fruitful if they involve all stakeholders that reflect the voices of the informal workers. According to him,

Central government's new agenda involves centralization of power; opposite of what we need now—"Decentralization" is the need of the hour as it empowers the state boards and other organizations like the unions and NGOs to work at grassroots level and address local developmental needs (Personal interview, October 15, 2020).

The Digital Welfare State and Migrant Realities

With the advent of the digital revolution, governments across the world have adopted strategies to transform public services through technology. In India too, most of the welfare schemes of central, state, and local governments are operated as a Direct Benefits Transfer (DBT) programme where cash is transferred directly in the bank accounts of beneficiaries. The DBT programme is built on the convergence of Jan Dhan bank account, Aadhaar (biometric-authenticated unique identification number), and mobile number, and is called the JAM trinity³⁰ in popular parlance. Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) is a financial inclusion programme started by the Government of India in 2014 to cover all unbanked households in India, aiming to provide affordable financial services to rural as well as urban households.³¹ However, the anticipated benefit of this ambitious scheme was put to test during the pandemic when it was evident that a large number of migrant workers were excluded from access to benefits and entitlements due to non-portability of entitlements.

The findings of the rapid assessment conducted by ActionAid in 2020 on 177 returnee migrant workers in fifteen districts of Bihar reported that eighty-nine per cent of the time, they could not avail any government

30 <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/all-you-wanted-to-know-about-jam-trinity/article22511736.ece>

31 <https://pmjdy.gov.in/>

Table 12.1 Reasons for not availing government schemes during lockdown (Sapkal, Shandilya and Suresh 2020).

No Bank Account	19
No Aadhar Account	28
Unaware	36
Insufficient documents (excl Aadhar card)	63
Migration	83
Documents and bank account linked are not with Aadhar	89

schemes due to the lack of their Aadhaar being linked to bank accounts and other documents (Sapkal et al. 2020; see also table 12.1).

The biometric registration, Aadhaar or the Unique Identity (UID) project, has been around since 2009, which was marketed as voluntary, and geared towards the poor. It was intended to include the undocumented into the system so as to be able to correctly disseminate the social benefits to the right individuals. In 2012, with the passage of the Aadhaar Bill by the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament, it became mandatory for all citizens to have an UID, otherwise they would be denied the entitlements as well as any government services (Arora 2019). Allowing the government to link the delivery of all its schemes and social welfare to Aadhaar, including the disbursement of all benefits and subsidies, is a possible barrier to the receipt of social transfers, as in the case of the migrant workers. In a country where millions are homeless and labour year-round in harsh manual work which wears out fine fingerprints, these are very real concerns (Gelb and Clark 2013a; 2013b). Moreover, Lyon (2003) pointed out that identification by biometrics leads to “social sorting,” i.e., a biased treatment of some groups, especially marginalized ones, such as irregular migrants.

In 2015, the Prime Minister of India linked PMJDY—a national financial inclusion scheme—to Aadhaar in order to improve access to banking, remittance, credit, insurance, and pensions (Subramanya 2015). However, a survey by the NGO Indus Action, focused on policy implementation between April 6 and May 30, 2020, covering 5,242 families across eleven states of India, found that only fifty-nine per cent of the 2,233 women eligible for Jan Dhan reported that they had received the benefit,³² thirty-four per cent said they did not receive the transfer, and seven per cent said they did not know if they received the benefit (Patel, Divakar and Prabhakar 2020). Account dormancy due to infrequent usage and limited access to banks

32 <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/maharashtras-first-economic-dole-rs-2000-cash-for-12-lakh-construction-workers-6368738/>

in rural areas were the main reasons cited by the respondents. The survey assessed the beneficiaries' access to rations, employment status, healthcare, and government schemes, and pointed out that almost forty per cent of Jan Dhan account holders could not access the government's COVID-19 relief.³³

A minimum digital literacy, however, is necessary for workers to harness the internet for availing banking services from their mobile phones. In his interview, the General Secretary of the Construction Workers Federation of India, V. Sashikumar spoke of the positive transformational potential of digital technologies that might work in favour of workers, while increasing their registrations:

Digitalization can be a pathway to formalization of the construction sector in India, provided the workers are imparted with basic digital knowledge and most importantly, an awareness is generated amongst them about the benefits of gaining digital literacy in itself (Personal interview, October 15, 2020).

He pointed to the fact that the workers employed in the construction sector mostly come to the city from rural areas in search for better prospects, and they generally lack digital literacy, which becomes a barrier to registration. In this regard, the government's flagship Digital India³⁴ programme, along with other initiatives taken by the private sector (such as the Google India and Tata Trusts' initiative Internet Saathi),³⁵ could prove beneficial in improving digital literacy³⁶ among the rural community if implemented in true letter and spirit.

The President of the Construction Workers' Federation of India (CWFI), Sukhbir Singh, however, in his interview expressed his dissatisfaction on the way the entire digitization process of the workers' online registration is carried out in the country:

Undoubtedly, digital technology and platforms can play a significant role in formalizing this sector, conditional to the process remaining corruption-free (Personal interview, October 11, 2020).

33 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/business/2020/mar/27/15-crore-unregistered-construction-workers-in-the-lurch-sans-relief-2122056.html#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20Government%20of%20India's,are%20registered%20with%20welfare%20boards>

34 <https://digitalindia.gov.in/>

35 <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/future-of-work/internet-saathi-improving-digital-literacy-among-women/50951/1>

36 <https://nasscomfoundation.org/national-digital-literacy-mission/>

In this regard, he pointed to many north Indian states, including Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, and Rajasthan, where online registration of the BOCW has sown seeds of corruption.

He further added,

The government approved Common Service Centers that aim to provide assistance to the workers regarding their online registrations and educating the digitally illiterate, are run by private companies—who have started charging unfair prices to the workers under the pretext of faulty paperwork (Personal interview, October 11, 2020).

As a part of National E-Governance Plan Scheme, Common Service Centers are physical facilities for delivering e-services to rural and remote locations where availability of computers and internet was negligible or absent.

The President of Inter-State Migration Workers' Federation of Karnataka in another interview on migrant challenges spoke on the issue of digital harassment that keeps the workers away from registration. According to him,

this online application process (of registration) is very cumbersome for these unorganized workers, for interstate migrant workers; it is just like a “digital harassment.” The President explained the twin challenges for these workers—of being unorganized and as being migrants, that possibly pushes them towards exploitation. He further adds, “the migrants face a huge language barrier in the host states, making the online registration process difficult for them (Personal interview, August 5, 2021).

It is thus understood that apart from the exploitation that the migrant workers face in the informal sector, they are prone to cultural discrimination in the host states, aggravating their precarities.

The interview narratives showcase that such loopholes in implementation of the digital platforms and services are indicative of poor governance that needs an overhaul to address the issues of informal migrant workers.

Scope for Social Protection? A Roadmap for Inclusion through Informal Channels

With the institutional structures and measures of social protection by the government showing lack of inclusivity, other informal channels in India have emerged during the pandemic to provide relief to the informal

workers. Globally, smartphones, together with applications like WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as global positioning system (GPS) devices, have become tools of strategic intervention and created possibilities for distressed migrants to connect with activists and state actors (Nedelcu and Soysüren 2020).

Recent mobile apps in India such as Bharat Shramik,³⁷ MyRojgaar,³⁸ and Mazdoor³⁹ showcase the potential of digital technologies to assist the workers in these testing times. For instance, Bharat Shramik uses its match-making technology to help employers find suitable workers in their area from their worker database. Interviewing the CEO of Bharat Shramik, Akshat Mittal, it was found that the pandemic has generated new job demands with around 100,000 workers and employers registering themselves on their newly launched portal. He explained that “our goal is to create a reshuffled skill map of India because after COVID-19, the skills have also shuffled with the migrated workers.” He pointed out that due to the reverse migration, the skills of the workers have also reshuffled across states, where the migrant worker now creates demand for work in his home state rather than the host state. On asking about the issue of registration of the worker on the portal, he said that

the workers need to just register themselves through a call and we are now upgrading and thinking of implementing solutions like Shramik ID as a step towards organizing the unorganized sector (Personal interview, September 17, 2021).

The collected data is made available to prospective employers who are struggling to find the right kind of workers, as their previous employees have migrated. The employers, in turn, register and search for workers based on their skill requirements in a particular location.

Such portals driven by technology could possibly eliminate the long-standing monopolies of middlemen who have become an indispensable part of the construction industry, contributing further to the informality of the sector. According to Sukhbir Singh,

the “big” construction companies subcontract the work to small contractors or “dalals” [middlemen], who in turn employ the labourers in dire

37 <https://www.bharatshramik.in/>

38 https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.vegavid.myrojgaar&hl=en_IN&gl=US

39 https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.oofbox.mazdoor&hl=en_IN&gl=US

need of employment—eventually making them victims of exploitation (Personal interview, October 11, 2020).

His interview revealed that though these “dalals” (middlemen) play an important role in employing the migrant workers, it comes at the expense of the workers’ security, given that they are not employed by these big companies directly or by the government, eventually landing them in contractual and informal employment. Digital platforms seem to hold a promising future for the workers if leveraged ethically and efficiently with full awareness of their plight. As empowerment is closely related to agency, in this case, the precarious migrants’ capacity to make “conscious decisions” to use ICTs to overcome migration process constraints (Şanlıer Yüksel 2020), strong symbiotic efforts from NGOs, labour unions, government think tanks, and policymakers is needed to resolve the problems and concerns of the workers before they get institutionalized. With India embarking on its journey to attain the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 8) “Decent Work and Economic Growth for all,” it needs to be seen how far it has achieved the provision of “productive dignified employment to its citizens.”⁴⁰ Economic growth propelled by decent work is the only way to unlock true human potential and raise the quality of life for all.

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40 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>

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