

Business Line

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## A PROTECTIVE NET

Lured by a local piece-rate worker, Basavanna, a 29-year-old construction worker from Bidar in north-east Karnataka, migrated to Bangalore to work on a 'big' project. Three months later, on completing the short-term assignment, he finds himself jobless and has nowhere to go. "The mason is absconding. There are no hopes of getting another job and I cannot return home as I cannot do farm work," he says.

Bangalore's booming construction industry employs hundreds of such migrant labourers from neighbouring Hosur and Dharmapuri, and the drought-hit districts of Bidar, Gulbarga and Raichur. The city also woos skilled artisans from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa. According to a conservative estimate, there are 5 lakh construction workers in the city, with 30-40% of them being migrant workers.

To tackle the problems of this growing community, Maya, a Bangalore-based NGO, started LabourNet last year to serve as an information exchange for the industry. Says Sharat K, co-ordinator, "We wanted to develop a database of workers in Bangalore, which would be useful to builders and contractors and, at the same time, infuse some formality in the industry's hiring system."

Workers can register at LabourNet, and access information on available jobs and opportunities for skill enhancement.

The construction industry outsources most work to sub-contractors who, in turn, hire piece-rate workers (PRWs) or masons to bring in the labourers.

LabourNet realised that it had to tap the PRWs for information on labourers. "Often, builders and contractors have no idea how many labourers are employed at a site or where they come from. They are not even aware of the mandatory safety norms."

One reason why PRWs and sub-contractors encourage migrant labour is because it is cheaper. "Contractors and PRWs hire plumbers from Orissa, carpenters from Rajasthan and painters from Bihar or UP because they are cheaper and are willing to take up short-term assignments," says Sharat. Coming from diverse regions, these migrant workers do not have the advantage of collective bargaining. **Many of the labourers cannot even open a bank account because they do not have a permanent address. "We wanted sub-contractors to pay the workers through bank accounts, but that is turning out to be difficult,"** concedes Sharat.

LabourNet has so far enrolled 250 PRWs and 1,000 workers in the city. And three construction companies are already hiring labourers through LabourNet.

Now the NGO is focussing on issues such as the lack of safety standards at project sites, and lack of formal training and education among the workers.

During a visit to one of the construction sites, a co-ordinator saw a woman worker negotiating her way up a staircase strewn with hazardous material such as nails, screws, sharp implements, and iron rods. "Safety is not just about providing helmets and safety belts," says Sharat. "Most such gear are not suited to Indian conditions, and are too large-sized for our workers."

And safety committees are absent in most projects. LabourNet has constituted a technical team to conduct safety audits for companies. In the last six months, based on the team's recommendations, the NGO has persuaded two companies to adopt safety measures.

Accident insurance is another area where LabourNet has met with fair success. The concept of health and accident insurance was hitherto completely alien to the industry. LabourNet has persuaded several workers to take up Oriental Insurance Co's Janata Accident Scheme that covers medical

claims up to Rs 20,000 in case of an accident. This comes for a nominal premium of Rs 20 per annum.

LabourNet now wants to introduce better work practices in the construction industry and set up an assessment and training centre for workers. "There are no technical training courses for labourers, not even at ITIs," says Sharat. In fact, the NGO is developing training modules for labourers and PRWs to help standardise work.

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