



# Migrant Construction Workers in Ahmedabad: A Profile

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## Introduction

Over the years, Rajasthani migrants have come to overwhelmingly occupy specific trade niches in Ahmedabad. Construction is amongst the largest sector and there are Rajasthani migrants across all points of the construction labour chain including the more skilled areas of carpentry, stone laying and polishing and fabrication. Other sectors that Rajasthani workers occupy include hotel, restaurant, canteen and catering work inclusive of running small, wayside eateries; junk and scrap recycling; head-loading and load-cart pulling, vegetable vending and the most personalised of all urban services - domestic work. There are many other areas in which the Rajasthani migrant has come to be a growing workforce, for example in security services and transportation.

Profiling of a group or a community, based on their trade or occupations may not be difficult but the findings could be illusory as their inherent and acquired – lets say after migration and subsequently - characteristics often are a complicated mix. The word “profile” has different connotations such as: “Outlines”, “Side View”, “Shapes”, “Silhouette”, “Contours”. Pegging them down to a singular profile, trade wise, may not be very realistic.

With this caution under consideration, it can be said that Profiling would eventually mean examining, understanding and summarizing some of the following and more and more

- The Group/s
- Understanding the groups’ migration patterns;
- Understanding the recruitment system;
- Exploring the owner – contractor – labor relationship/s;
- Ascertaining their incomes, expenditure, savings, and investments;
- Understanding the destination environment in terms of work and living conditions;
- Examining the communication regime between the destination and the source; the migrant and those left behind;
- Exploring the potential for skill up-gradation, self-improvement and diversification of careers and livelihood.

## Profiling Construction Workers

### *The Group/s*

- 2.1.1 The loaders and porters from Rajasthan who flock to Ahmedabad typically belong to the southern parts of the state, but as mentioned earlier, they could come from the other parts of the state as well.
- 2.1.2 Size wise, the migrants involved with construction sector in Ahmedabad are the largest and perhaps except for those who came in the city at the onset of the textile sector, they are also the longest serving and surviving migrant population in the city.
- 2.1.3 There are two basic types seen among the construction workers. Those who stay put in the city and those who come visiting (for a period of eight to nine months every year).
- 2.1.4 Skill wise too, there are two basic types; Masons or “Karigar” and Helpers. Masons have more or less permanent work on their hands while Helpers tend to float from one site to another depending on his/her relationship with those who hire them.
- 2.1.5 This is one sector where women are found almost in equal strength, if not more. There are hardly any women masons but as helpers they abound.
- 2.1.6 In terms of pitching their skills in the market, again there are two types. Those who come and wait from early morning at pre-designated labor gathering sites strewn across the city. The others are those who work at building construction sites and live there.
- 2.1.7 The sites where the construction workers gather everyday are known as “Choktthi” and there are about 200 small and big choktthi in Ahmedabad city. Some even specializes in a branch of construction, For example the one at Raipur, perhaps the oldest, now harbors construction workers who specialize in marble fitting.
- 2.1.8 The other big ones are located at Dariyapur, Vasna, Memnagar, Ambawadi, Paldi, Sola, Narol, Isanpur, Nawa Vadaj etc. It has been reported that less than 10 % of these workers are women. Among them, there are almost no skilled workers. They are all helpers. The choktthi types have “couples” too; either the male is a skilled worker and the female a labor or both are labors.
- 2.1.9 It is also seen that those who get work at the choktthi essentially works within the city; the contractor/employer “takes” them to the site. The seasonal labor in the construction sector guard, as it were, the boundaries of the city and beyond. The booming economy of Ahmedabad has pushed the construction sites (of row houses, bungalows, mansions etc.) to the outskirts of the city and this is where the seasonal construction labors throng.

- 2.1.10 The type of works they do include: construction of buildings, both residential and commercial; sewerage and drainage line construction, laying of telephone lines, tiles laying, construction accessories work, marble work, specialized and skilled jobs etc.
- 2.1.11 From Rajasthan, the construction workers emanate from all parts but even here there are specialized areas. Marble fitters come from Jodhpur and Jaipur, Plaster and masonry workers from Dungarpur, and tile layers and polishers from Udaipur.

**2.2 Understanding the Groups’ Migration Patterns**

- 2.2.1 As mentioned earlier, the ones who seek employment at the choktthi are those who have longer migration cycle; some are even permanently settled in the city. Those who live on the building sites and float from one site to another, have smaller migration cycles.
- 2.2.2 Among the “non settled” ones, the choktthi types stay in the city for about 6 months – normally between the early winter and the monsoon. The floaters on the other hand have a migration cycle of 2.5 months each.
- 2.2.3 Our understanding is that it is the payment cycle with the floaters that determines the length of their stay in the city (rather, at the site) than the nature or the availability of work. In today’s situation there is no dearth of work for the floaters but they tend to go back to their villages as soon as a payment occurs, and therefore the turn over is also high.
- 2.2.4 The “settled” ones from the choktthi type, are like any other permanent migrants living in the city. They go back to where they originally came from, occasionally.

**2.3 Understanding the Recruitment system**

- 2.3.1 A long and partially invisible recruitment chain exists in the construction sector in the city. Its partial invisibility stems from the fact that often the workers do not know who they are working for. This is so because construction work in the city is a classic case of multiple outsourcing. The following paragraph will make it clearer.
- 2.3.2 The actors are: Builder / Engineer / Contractor / Sub Contractor1 / Sub Contractor2 / Sub Contractor3 / Labor Recruiter / Skilled Labors / Unskilled labors.
- 2.3.2 The recruitment chain / system works as follows:

Sr. No	Who	Position in the chain	Domicile	Works as	Earns
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01	Builder	Top	Local	Owner and Trader	@ Rs. per square feet The exact amount is never disclosed
02	Engineer	Upper Middle	Local	Builder/Engineer / Contractor	
03	Contractor	Upper Middle	Local	Builder/Recruiter	
04	Sub Contractor1	Middle	Local	Material and Labor Recruiter	
05	Sub Contractor2	Middle	Local / Rajasthani	Recruiter of Labor	
06	Sub Contractor3	Middle	Rajasthani	Recruiter of Labor / worker	Rs. 2 – 7 per square feet plus wages
07	Labor Recruiter	Lower Middle	Rajasthani	Recruiter / Worker	Wages
08	Skilled Labor	Bottom	Rajasthani	Worker	Wages
09	Unskilled Labor	Bottom	Rajasthani	Worker	Wages

## 2.4 The Groups' Economic Status

- 1.1.1 There is a distinct disparities so far the incomes go; between the skilled and non skilled workers, between the choktthi types and the floaters.
- 1.1.2 The skilled choktthi workers get as much as Rs 7000 to 8000 per month while the helpers may make half the amount. The skilled workers at the site – on the “paper” at least – get about as much while the workers even less than their choktthi counterparts.
- 1.1.3 From a conventional view point these workers are not “paid” monthly. They are always given advances, mostly weekly to buy the ration, towards their monthly wages. Once in a while when they get these advances in their hands they head for their villages. It is normal, that at the end of a working cycle they have just enough to be able to travel back.
- 1.1.4 For the choktthi workers, the cash flow remains steady so long as they keep finding work, but hardly any savings were reported. For the floaters however, the question of saving some amount from the advances they get do not arise.

## 2.5 Living and Working

- 2.5.1 Working conditions for all types of construction workers, besides the occupational and safety hazards, are temporary and casual.

- 2.5.2 For the choktthi workers, the payment is made daily, in cash. The employer for the day has to also pay them the fare to travel (both ways) to the sites and arrange for tea as well. The workers look after their boarding requirements by either taking along with them the lunch boxes or managing at the sites where it is more likely that once again a Rajasthani migrant only would look after their needs!
- 2.5.3 The floaters have more “settled” working conditions at the site in the sense that they need not travel long distances across the city for work. But for most sites, the above advantage ends there.
- 2.5.4 One unsettling work factor for them is often that they hardly know who they are working for. The helpers/workers who form labor gangs at the site report to one of their elk only, who also works on the same site but in the “skilled labor” category and who more often than not has recruited many of them!
- 2.5.5 From a conventional view point these workers are not “paid” monthly. They are always given advances, mostly weekly to buy the ration, towards their monthly wages. Once in a while when they get these advances in their hands they head for their villages. It is normal, that at the end of a working cycle they have just enough to be able to travel back.
- 2.5.6 The living conditions at the site leave much to be desired, generally. There are no basic facilities and women / children suffer the most. Either they stay in make shift sheds or occupy the empty rooms they construct one by one in say an apartment block / a high rise. They are not charged of course!
- 2.5.7 The choktthi workers stay close to their areas of “display”, and in cramped conditions. Those who have not brought their families share a room, often more than 6-7 persons occupying it. Those with their families stay separately but do not have any high end living quarters. It was reported that the monthly rent of such arrangements range from Rs. 0800 – 1200. Most of such migrant quarters in the city are found to be on public/government lands that have been “encroached” upon, are therefore, illegal.

### 3.0 **Key Issues**

- The “casual” and “loose” nature of work;
- No work/employment guarantee or security;
- A very long and partially an “invisible” chain of employer – employee relationship;
- Exploitation in terms long and undecided hours of work; wages etc.
- Sexual harassment and exploitation of the women construction workers;

- Lack of basic facilities and amenities at the sites while the choktthi types live in cramped quarters and unhygienic environment; and,
- Loss of education for the children of those who stay on the sites with families; often the bigger children getting recruited at very low wages.