

Enduring precarity in the Global South: lived experiences and coping strategies of construction workers in Assam, India

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the lived experiences and coping strategies of informal construction workers in Assam, India, within the framework of enduring precarity and fragmented social protection. It explores how workers navigate structural vulnerabilities in the absence of effective institutional support. Using a mixed-method approach, the study combines a cross-sectional survey of 765 workers with focus group discussions and in-depth interviews across selected cities. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations, while qualitative data were thematically interpreted. The findings reveal a predominantly young, migrant, and low-educated workforce exposed to hazardous working conditions, inadequate housing, and limited access to welfare schemes. Despite the presence of social protection programmes, registration and coverage remain low, and union presence is minimal. In response to these vulnerabilities, workers endure by relying on contractor advances, occupational diversification, informal networks, and somatic coping practices to manage income instability and health risks. While these strategies enable short-term survival, they often reinforce long-term vulnerabilities. The findings highlight the need for context-sensitive policy interventions addressing structural barriers to social protection. The study contributes to the existing literature by empirically grounding the concept of “enduring precarity” and demonstrating how survival strategies simultaneously function as coping mechanisms and mechanisms of structural reproduction.

KEYWORDS: coping strategies | resilience | vulnerability | construction workers | Assam

1. INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is a major component of economic growth. Globally, the construction industry is a primary engine of economic activity, employing a significant share of the global labour force. Crucially, it absorbs a large proportion of low-skilled and migrant workers with limited formal education (Deshingkar, 2017; Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016). In countries like India, it is estimated that about 13% of the total workforce relies on construction for livelihood after agriculture (PIB, 2023), contributing around 8-9% to India's GDP (RBI, 2025). Although construction work is crucial for urban development, it is one of the most precarious



forms of employment worldwide (Swider, 2015). The workers in this industry are prone to irregular employment (Dhal, 2020), wage insecurity (Tiwary et al., 2013), occupational hazards (Gopalakrishnan & Kumar, 2020), sub-standard working conditions (Goswami, 2024), and limited access to social safety nets (John, 2004; Tiwary & Gangopadhyay, 2011). Besides, the informal nature of construction jobs also suggests that labour relations are often short-term, sub-contracted, and lightly regulated, which makes workers extremely vulnerable to economic shock (Bhoi et al., 2022) and workplace exploitation (Bremner, 1996; Picherit, 2009; Pattenden, 2011; Srivastava, 2020; Shah & Lerche, 2020). Furthermore, across many developing economies, the sector operates under weak institutional structures, in which occupational safety standards, labour rights enforcement, and social protection systems are generally weak (Pattenden, 2018; Dhal, 2020; Jha, 2021).

These vulnerabilities are especially acute in countries like India, where most of the labour force works in the informal sector. These conditions contribute to what researchers increasingly refer to as “enduring precarity,” in which workers must constantly seek ways to survive amid economic uncertainty and structural marginalisation to make ends meet. To address these structural vulnerabilities, workers employ a range of coping mechanisms to manage daily economic and social uncertainties. Studies on informal labour across the Global South highlight a wide range of coping mechanisms, including reliance on kinship and migrant networks (Boccagni, 2015), labour mobility (De Haas, 2021), occupational diversification (Ellis, 2000), informal credit arrangements (Alowais & Suliman, 2025), and collective survival strategies (Agarwala, 2008). Such coping strategies tend to emerge in response to insufficient institutional support and fragmented social protection systems. Studies have revealed that informal workers often rely on social networks and community-based support systems to deal with employment insecurity and income volatility (Leonard, 2000). Although these measures bring about short-term resilience, in most cases they do not eradicate the structural weaknesses they face (Nordman, 2016; Pitoyo et al., 2021; Aditya & Amri, 2023).

These broader dynamics are particularly relevant in the context of Assam, where the labour market has undergone important structural changes, with the state increasingly experiencing both outward labour migration and the expansion of informal and subcontracted employment. In sectors such as tea, manufacturing and construction, changes in production and employment relations have contributed to greater reliance on temporary, casual and subcontracted labour, weakening stable employment relationships and access to labour protections (Xaxa, 2018). In rural areas, land fragmentation, recurrent floods and limited non-farm employment further constrain livelihood opportunities, encouraging workers to seek employment beyond their places of origin. Construction has consequently emerged as an important source of urban employment for a mobile and largely informal workforce (Das, 2018), with Bengali-speaking Muslim workers constituting a substantial share of this labour force (Mitra, 2018). Migration in Assam, therefore, needs to be understood not only as an individual livelihood strategy, but also as part of a broader labour-market process shaped by uneven development, subcontracting and the demand for flexible labour.

It is against this backdrop that this research examines the lived experiences of informal construction workers in Assam—a region characterised by unique migratory patterns and socio-economic complexities. While the broader discourse on informal labour in India is

well-established, the specificities of “enduring precarity” in the Northeast region of India remain under-researched. This paper seeks to fill this gap by analysing how workers perceive and navigate vulnerability in their everyday lives. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach involving quantitative surveys and qualitative narratives, the study illuminates the social, economic, and behavioural mechanisms used to sustain livelihoods amid unstable employment and fragmented social protection. More importantly, this study contributes to the literature by showing how informal construction workers endure precarity through their bodies, informal credit, livelihood diversification, household support, and social networks, which provide immediate means of managing insecurity but may also reproduce their dependence on informal labour relations and sustain precarious livelihoods over time.

2. PRECARIETY AND RESILIENCE: A BACKGROUND

The conceptualisation of precarious labour has become a central fault line in contemporary labour sociology, with the field primarily divided between Eurocentric theories of a novel structural crisis and Global South critiques emphasising historical continuity. Guy Standing famously posits the emergence of the “precariat” as a new, dangerous class-in-the-making, defined by its chronic uncertainty, insecurity, and a fundamental detachment from traditional occupational identities. For Standing, this precariat is defined by what it lacks- specifically, the seven forms of labour security that characterised industrial citizenship during the post-World War II Keynesian-Fordist era (Standing, 2011, 2014; Millar, 2017). In contrast to Standing’s post-Fordist framework, Southern scholars such as Ronaldo Munck and Ben Scully argue that this narrative is profoundly Eurocentric, falsely universalising the dismantling of the Northern welfare state and treating it as a global baseline (Munck, 2013; Scully, 2016). Building upon this Southern critique, it becomes evident that precarity is not a “new” crisis in India or the broader Global South, but rather the historical norm. As Scully and Munck note, for workers in the former colonial world, unstable and oppressive work regimes, devoid of de-commodified social protections, have been a defining feature since the colonial era (Munck, 2013; Scully, 2016). Quantitative evidence starkly supports this theoretical claim regarding the scale of the phenomenon. Recent International Labour Organisation data indicates that informal employment accounts for 87.8% of the total workforce in Southern Asia (Vij, 2019), while Agarwala (2013) notes that contract and casual workers form the massive, enduring base of India’s non-agricultural class structure. Jan Breman’s historical analysis further reinforces this, demonstrating that the anticipated upward mobility from an agrarian to a formal industrial society never materialised for the majority. Instead, rather than representing a novel phenomenon of de-proletarianisation, precarity in India must be understood as the enduring structural condition of the working class under peripheral capitalism. It is driven by continuous processes of accumulation by dispossession, producing an ever-expanding army of “footloose labour” that is structurally denied the standard employment relationship and perpetually subordinated to capital (Harvey, 2003; Breman, 2023).

The enduring nature of this precarity manifests most acutely in the Social Protection Gap, which must be examined through the lens of “fragmented citizenship.” Agarwala (2013) observes that Indian informal workers, lacking a recognised employer-employee relationship, have shifted their collective action away from workplace-based demands for traditional labour

rights and toward state-targeted demands for welfare benefits. Instead, they direct their mobilisations toward state-targeted demands for welfare benefits. This strategic pivot relies on their political power as voting citizens to demand the “de-commodification” of their labour through state-sponsored health, education, and housing initiatives. By articulating their demands in this way, informal workers are dignifying their discontent, actively forging a new social contract that bypasses the elusive employer to hold the state accountable for their reproductive needs. Crucially, however, the existence of dedicated legal and welfare provisions for construction workers, including the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) framework, has not translated into effective social protection for many workers. The protection gap, therefore, reflects not the complete absence of institutional recognition but persistent weaknesses in implementation, accessibility, and last-mile delivery. This is particularly important in the context of India’s informal labour market, where the absence of a stable employer-employee relationship has historically shifted responsibility towards the state and welfare institutions (Agarwala, 2013). At the same time, the persistence of informal and footloose labour relations contributes to workers’ continued vulnerability despite the existence of formal welfare institutions (Bremar, 2023).

Within this landscape of structural vulnerability, the daily survival of construction workers relies heavily on a wide range of informal coping strategies (Ellis, 2000; Agarwala, 2008; Boccagni, 2015; De Haas, 2021; Alowais & Suliman, 2025). For instance, in somatic coping, workers utilise their bodies as their primary capital by developing body-management practices to adapt to physically strenuous and hazardous work, often at the cost of their long-term health (Millar, 2014; Waite, 2007). Here, intellectual challenges arise around the conceptualisation of ‘resilience.’ While some scholars frame social resilience as a positive, political capacity for marginalised individuals to negotiate adversity and attain valuable livelihood outcomes (Bussi et al., 2019), critical feminist scholars such as Mezzadri (2020) argue that this resilience is, in fact, a coercive form of unpaid social reproduction. When a worker’s bodily capital is exhausted, the intergenerational household and the rural village absorb the shock, reabsorbing the worker during lean seasons or health emergencies. Thus, what is often romanticised as “individual coping” or ‘resilience’ is, in fact, an unpaid subsidy to capital that allows employers to externalise the social costs of labour reproduction. Furthermore, a deep tension exists between this individual, somatic coping, which Millar characterises as a “politics of detachment” or withdrawal from normative capitalist labour (Millar, 2014), and the collective union advocacy described by Agarwala, which seeks to actively re-engage the state through mass mobilisation and collective welfare boards (Agarwala, 2013).

Despite the robust theoretical debates surrounding the precariousness of labour, the structural mechanisms of the social protection gap, and the unpaid social reproduction that sustains it, a significant empirical and theoretical gap remains regarding the specific localised dynamics in India’s Northeast. Assam presents a distinctive historical and political economy, with union density substantially above the national average (Agarwala, 2013), yet how informal construction workers endure and navigate precarity in this context remains insufficiently understood.

3. METHOD

This study was conducted in three major cities of Assam. To capture the state's geographical and cultural diversity, Guwahati from Lower Assam, Dibrugarh from Upper Assam, and Silchar from the Barak Valley were purposively selected. For instance, Guwahati is the largest city in Assam and is the gateway to Northeast India. Dibrugarh is the major city in the upper Assam region and the second capital of the state. Silchar is a major city in the Barak Valley of Assam and serves as the entry point to the states of Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura.

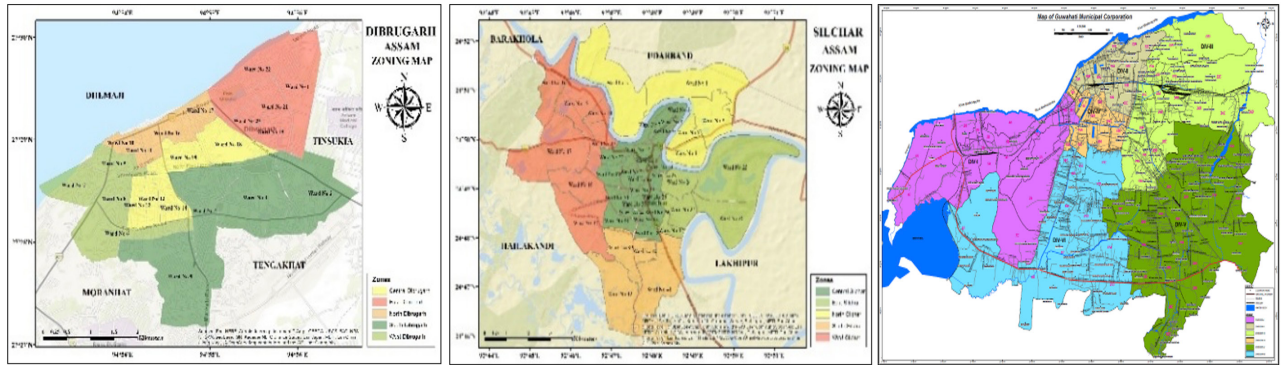


Fig. 1. Map of Dibrugarh, Silchar and Guwahati (left to right)

Source: Authors' own preparation for Dibrugarh and Silchar; Guwahati map adapted from Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC).

The study uses a mixed-methods approach to collect data. A worker-level survey ($N = 765$) was conducted to collect the quantitative data. This cross-sectional survey collected data on the socio-demographic profile of workers, employment profile, living and working conditions, occupational health hazards and access to social security. The qualitative data were gathered through focus group discussions ($n = 5$), in-depth interviews ($n = 15$), and observation. Three FGDs were conducted with groups of construction workers, one in Dibrugarh, Silchar and Guwahati, while two FGDs were conducted with key institutional stakeholders in Guwahati, comprising union representatives of the All-Assam Construction Workers Union (AACWU) and the Sadau Assam Nirman Sramik Union (SANSU). These qualitative methods helped triangulate the survey data and explore workers' lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms. Apart from primary data, secondary data were also collected from research articles, newspapers, as well as government reports and working papers.

The primary population of interest comprises informal construction workers employed across various urban projects and sites, including residential, commercial, and public infrastructure sites, as well as labour "chowks." To ensure reliability, the study applies a specific inclusion criterion: each respondent must have at least 6 months of work experience in the construction sector. This requirement ensures that the participants have sufficient familiarity with local wage patterns, workplace safety practices, and the cyclical nature of informal employment, thereby providing more credible data regarding ongoing vulnerabilities. The primary data were collected by the authors, with assistance from trained field enumerators for the survey, while the authors themselves conducted the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Data

were analysed using cross-tabulations and descriptive statistics. In descriptive statistics, mean, standard deviation, percentage and graphical representation were used. For comparative analyses among cities, cross-tabulation was used. Qualitative data were analysed using several key steps: reading and annotating transcripts, identifying common themes, categorising data, and interpreting themes by providing explanations and bringing the analysis together. The study followed standard ethical protocols, with voluntary participation and verbal informed consent obtained from all participants prior to data collection. All participants and interviews were anonymised.

4. RESULTS

This paper analyses the challenges workers face and the coping strategies they adopt to mitigate those challenges. The findings are organised into seven key thematic areas that progress from individual profiles to systemic issues and eventual survival mechanisms.

4.1. DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

The socio-demographic profile of construction workers in Assam reveals a predominantly male (94.9%) and youthful workforce. Nearly 58.2% of workers fall within the 15-29 age bracket, while only 5.8% are aged 50 or above. This concentration of youth highlights its labour-intensive nature, which is driven by physical stamina. The workforce is characterised by high mobility, with 73.5% identifying as migrants. While the majority originate from other districts within Assam (62.3%), a significant portion comes from West Bengal (23.5%) and Jharkhand (7%).

In terms of religion and social identity, the workforce is predominantly Muslim (66.5%), followed by Hindus (30.2%). Nearly half (48.3%) belong to the General category, while 36.4% are from Other Backward Classes (OBC), with smaller representations from Scheduled Castes (10.1%) and Scheduled Tribes (5.2%). Formal education is notably limited, with 11.1% being illiterate and 45.4% having completed only primary education. This lack of educational attainment restricts their occupational mobility, confining many workers to physically demanding, low-skilled roles where they face sustained exploitation.

Additionally, a vast majority (82.7%) get employed through a Contractor (Thikadar) or a mediator. This reinforces a network-mediated dependency that often bypasses formal institutional oversight and escalates precarity and workers' exploitation. While the workforce is mostly male-dominated, the 5.1% female workforce is almost exclusively concentrated in the "Unskilled" category, often entering the site as "companion labour" to a husband or father.

Key Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Age Group	15-29 years	58.19
	30-39 years	24.77
	40-49 years	11.22
	50+ years	5.82
Gender	Male	94.92
Migrant Status		73.48
State of Origin	Assam	62.3
	West Bengal	23.48
	Jharkhand	7.0
	Others	7.22
Religion	Hindu	30.18
	Muslim	66.48
	Christian	3.34
Social Group	Scheduled Caste (SC)	10.14
	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	5.20
	Other Backward Class (OBC)	36.36
	General	48.3
Education Level	Illiterate	11.06
	Primary	45.35
	Secondary	36.98
	Higher Secondary or above	6.61
Total Respondents		765

Tab. 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents
Source: Field Survey 2025-26

4.2. WORKPLACE CHALLENGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Table 2 presents the working hours of construction workers. It is found that workers typically work between 8.6 and 9 hours per day, with some reporting shifts extending up to 12 hours. Unskilled workers, in particular, record the longest average hours, at around 9.04 hours, reflecting the intensity of the manual work they perform.

Mean Working Hours	Mean	Std. Dev	Min Hours	Max Hours
Unskilled	9.04	1.69	6	12
Semi-Skilled	8.63	1.31	8	12
Skilled	8.68	1.64	3	12

Tab. 2. Working Hours by Skill Level
Source: Field Survey 2025-2026

Workplace conditions further reveal a significant implementation gap regarding labour norms. While 60.5% of respondents reported working overtime and 64.9% worked at night, only 15.6% received any overtime pay. Basic site amenities are similarly inconsistent. While access to safe drinking water (76.6%) and toilets (63%) is relatively common, access to resting

rooms (59.9%) and seating arrangements (34.3%) remains inadequate. Furthermore, workers are routinely exposed to environmental hazards, including intense heat (41.2%), excessive dust (55.8%), and noise (28.4%). Safety risks are acute, with 30.2% facing the risk of falls and 24.1% tasked with frequent heavy lifting. Although 57.5% reported having Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), its actual use remains uncertain, and training is largely absent. The toll on health is evident: 51.9% reported work-related health problems, and 42.4% had sustained injuries. However, a severe gap in social protection is highlighted by the fact that only 14.4% of injured workers received any compensation from their employers. The reported injuries were primarily associated with workplace hazards such as falls, frequent heavy lifting, and prolonged physical exertion. The low level of compensation appears to result from both employer practices and workers' limited awareness of their labour rights. Low educational attainment, the migratory nature of employment, and the absence of stable employer-employee relationships further constrain workers' ability to report injuries, claim compensation, or pursue their rights. As a result, many occupational injuries remain managed individually rather than through formal compensation mechanisms.

Variables	Percentage
Working at night	64.86
Working Overtime	60.45
Overtime Payment Eligibility	15.61
Availability of Safe Drinking Water at worksite	76.59
Toilet facilities at worksite	62.97
Resting Room facilities at worksite	59.93
Tea/Snack Refreshment at worksite	25.37
Availability of sitting arrangement at worksite	34.30
Reported Intense Heat	41.17
Reported Noise	28.36
Reported Overcrowding	19.96
Reported Excessive Dust	55.75
Reported Risk to fall	30.19
Reported Lifting Heavy weights frequently	24.09
Reported Availability of PPE	57.54
Work-related Health Issues	51.86
Reported Injury	42.37
Reported Compensation for injury	14.44

Tab. 3. Workplace and Working Conditions

Source: Field Survey 2025-2026

The vulnerability of construction workers extends beyond the job site to their living conditions. A significant majority (71.1%) reside directly on or adjacent to construction sites, with only 19.6% living in their own homes. This lack of residential stability is compounded by severe overcrowding, with an average of 11.37 people per room. Most workers (60%) live in temporary shelters made of tin, tents, or corrugated sheets, which offer minimal privacy and protection from environmental stressors.

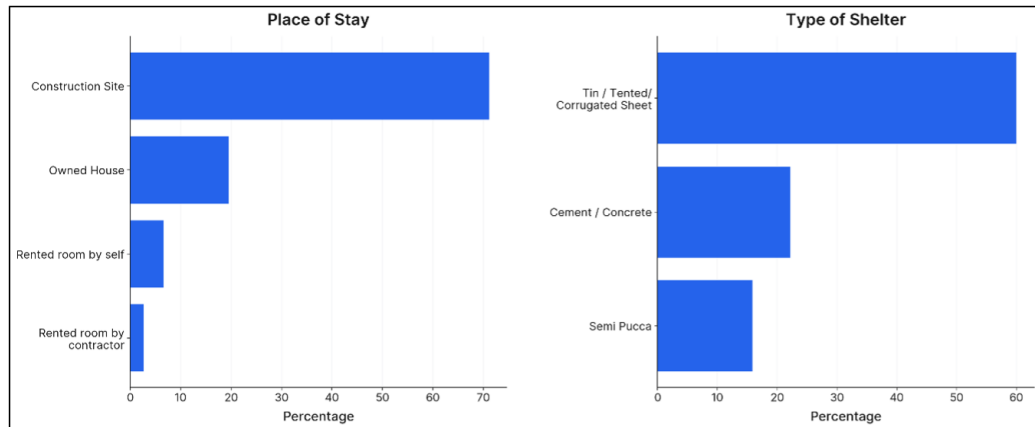


Fig. 2. Living conditions
Source: Field Survey 2025-2026

Sanitation and hygiene facilities in the living sites are largely informal and shared. Approximately 82.5% rely on common toilets for large groups, and 7.1% still practice open defecation. Bathing is particularly undignified, with 72.9% reporting that they bathe in open or public spaces. This disproportionately impacts the dignity and safety of female workers compared to their male peers, who can still manage to bathe outside often in public settings and is often normalised by society.

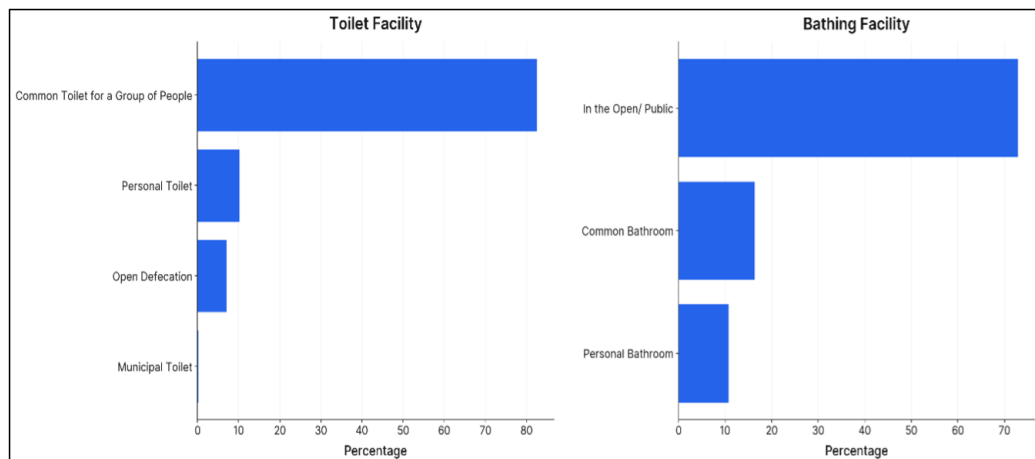


Fig. 3. Sanitation and bathing facilities
Source: Field Survey 2025-2026

Drinking water is primarily sourced from public taps (37.6%) or shared community sources. While 53.4% utilize LPG for cooking, 40% remain dependent on firewood, exposing them to

further respiratory risks. These findings illustrate a landscape of precarity where the absence of safely managed infrastructure forces workers into unsafe survival strategies.

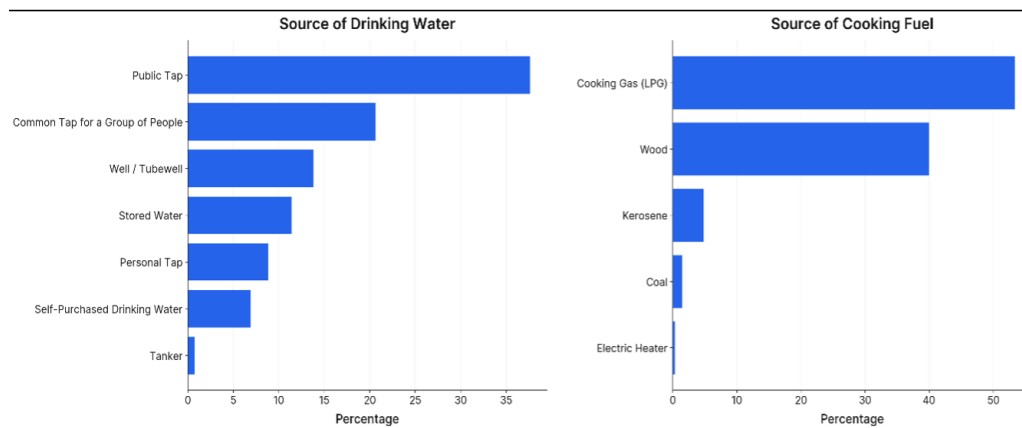


Fig. 4. Sources of Drinking water and cooking fuel
Source: Field Survey 2025-2026

4.3. ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF PRECARITY

The economic profile of workers reveals a life of sustained precarity, in which a significant portion of income is consumed by immediate survival needs and by supporting geographically distant households. Mean monthly expenditure on food stands at INR 2,404.94, while non-food expenditures average INR 1,989.28. However, the primary driver of economic vulnerability is the high monthly expenditure on dependents, which averages INR 7,252.30. Given the high prevalence of migration (73.5%), this figure indicates a “double burden”: workers must maintain their own survival in the urban site while remitting substantial sums to sustain their family units in their home districts.

Financial resilience is further eroded by a profound social protection gap, leaving workers uniquely exposed to health-related shocks. The average annual health expenditure is INR 11,643.36, a staggering amount for a workforce with limited access to formal insurance or employer-provided medical support. This lack of institutional support forces reliance on out-of-pocket spending, often to treat health problems or injuries sustained from hazardous on-site exposure levels.

The ability to accumulate capital as a buffer against instability is also severely restricted. The average monthly savings rate is a mere 6.78% of total income, leaving workers with virtually no protection against “economic shocks” or “workplace exploitation.”

Variable	Obs	Weight	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Monthly Income	765	765	15630.5	4325.2	6000	40000
Monthly Food Expenditure	765	765	2404.9	778.9	0	7000
Monthly Non-Food Expenditure	765	765	1989.2	838.1	500	6000
Monthly Expenditure on Dependents	714	712.9	7252.3	3332.1	0	70000
Annual Health Expenditure	765	765	11643.3	25796.2	0	450000
Monthly Savings % of Total Income	765	765	6.77	12.6	0	60
Amount of Debt	150	159.3	83442.7	85182.1	3000	500000

Tab. 4. Economic profile
Source: Field Survey 2025-2026

For the subset of workers currently in debt ($n = 150$), the financial burden is particularly acute, with an average debt of INR 83,442. This high level of indebtedness often reinforces a dependency on the thikadar debt-bond, as workers frequently turn to contractors for emergency advances to cover family crises or health emergencies. The high standard deviation in the amount of debt ($\sigma=85,182.1$) relative to the mean (INR 83,442.7) suggests significant financial polarisation, likely driven by extreme outliers such as catastrophic health shocks, as corroborated by survey data showing maximum annual health expenditures of INR 450,000 for some households. In the absence of formal institutional support, these informal credit arrangements provide immediate relief but ultimately exacerbate long-term vulnerability by locking workers into cycles of precarious labour.

4.4. THE SOCIAL PROTECTION GAP IN PRACTICE

Despite the existence of social security for labour welfare in India, the survey data reveals a profound implementation gap that leaves the majority of construction workers in Assam without a functional safety net. For instance, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) stands as a relative outlier, with 76.4% awareness and 67.1% registration. This higher reach is likely driven by strong public awareness resulting from effective government implementation, as the scheme is frequently promoted and recognised as a flagship initiative. Yet about one-third of the workforce remains unregistered. Awareness of and registration in social security schemes—Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) for life insurance, Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY) for accident insurance, and Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan (PMSYM) for pension—remain very low, with registration rates falling below 1%. This suggests that while these schemes exist on paper, they are largely perceived as unnecessary or inaccessible in workers' lived experiences.

For schemes specifically designed for construction and informal labour, the gap becomes even more acute. Only 21.3% of workers are registered with the Assam Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board (ABOCWWB), even though it is the primary institutional body for the sector. Furthermore, registration on the e-Shram Portal stands at only 31.9%, indicating limited penetration of targeted welfare mechanisms and persistent barriers to aware-

ness, accessibility, and effective outreach among informal workers. The low registration with ABOCWWB can be attributed to limited awareness of the Board and labour rights, low educational attainment, and the highly mobile nature of construction employment. Contractor-mediated recruitment and the absence of stable employer-employee relationships further weaken workers' access to information and formal registration processes.

4.5. UNION ADVOCACY

The role of labour unions in Assam's Construction sector presents a striking divergence between institutional intent and grassroots reality. While this paper emphasises the importance of collective bargaining, our findings reveal a profound disconnect. While union representatives described their organisations as active and engaged, the worker-level findings revealed very limited awareness of or interaction with these unions.

The most critical finding regarding collective resilience is the near-total invisibility of formal labour organisations among the workforce. Our quantitative survey revealed that awareness of labour unions is extremely low, with only 2% of respondents reporting any knowledge of or interaction with union bodies.

I have worked in different construction sites across Assam. I have seen different contractors, I have seen police and officers, I have seen many people coming to take our photos, but I have never seen a union leader come here to talk about our wages or our problems. We do not know who they are. (FGD 3, Dibrugarh).

This contradiction highlights a significant implementation gap in advocacy. While the unions may be active at the administrative or political level through engagement with the state government, their outreach at construction sites remains limited by resource constraints and the transience of construction sites. The illusion of protection is thus doubled: the state provides the illusion of legal safety nets, while the unions provide an illusion of collective power that rarely reaches the worker at the last mile. Here, the "illusion of protection" refers to the gap between formal institutional entitlements and workers' actual access to protection at the worksite.

Ultimately, this divergence confirms that the social protection gap is not just a failure of the state, but also a crisis of representation. And it can be rightly said that the union remains a "siloe" entity, unable to transform the individual struggles of workers into a cohesive collective movement for structural change. In the absence of these formal protections, workers are compelled to learn risk reduction through trial and error, leading to the precarious somatic and economic coping mechanisms discussed in the following sections.

4.6. SOMATIC COPING STRATEGIES

The somatic dimension of coping represents an active endurance strategy through which workers manage and use their bodies to sustain their capacity to work under the persistent physical strain and hazardous conditions of construction work. In the absence of effective safety standards and institutional support, the body becomes a primary resource for earning a livelihood, while the health costs of precarious employment are gradually absorbed by the worker (Waite, 2007). This bodily endurance is further shaped by the need to continually cope

with and survive the precarity of informal labour markets.

A central narrative arising from the qualitative data is the functional use of substances among workers. Contrary to traditional assumptions that substance use among informal workers is primarily for escapism or recreation (Bowen et al., 2014; Frimpong et al., 2023), participants in the focus group discussions (FGDs) clarified that consumption is highly strategic and labour-oriented. Workers described a reliance on specific stimulants, primarily alcohol, shikhar (packaged tobacco mixed with areca nut), bidi (tobacco), and ganja (cannabis), to overcome the physical barriers of the site:

(...) from what I see, the young guys mostly eat shikhar, ganja and bidi to increase endurance and focus... they get energy. Even we also sometimes consume shikhar. This boosts our moods. (Interview 4, Guwahati)

These substances help workers work long hours, often up to 12 hours, without feeling exhausted or collapsing. This everyday, practical knowledge is important for dealing with hard work that involves constant physical effort under intense heat and heavy dust. For many workers, these substances are the only means available to maintain the stamina needed to get through their daily work.

We start working before the sun rises, lifting bricks and cement all day for INR 450. Without sadha (chewed tobacco) and bidi, the body simply stops, and I feel my body doesn't work properly and feel easily tired and exhausted. (FGD 1, Silchar)

This “normalisation of risk” means that workers come to accept ongoing health problems as a natural and unavoidable part of their work. While the data shows that 51.9% of workers experience work-related health issues, their personal accounts reveal a sense of resignation. Problems like breathing difficulties, severe headaches, and long-term pain are not seen as medical conditions that need treatment, but rather as a normal part of their job.

If we went to a doctor for every cough or chest pain, we would never be able to work. The dust is something we deal with every day, and the pain is simply part of the job. We only seek medical help when the condition becomes so severe that we can no longer stand or continue working. (Interview 9, Dibrugarh)

Because regular medical check-ups are seen as too expensive and can lead to a loss of daily wages, workers rely on their own physical strength and bodily signs to assess their health. This reliance on the body's natural endurance shows a “double burden” of insecurity. Workers have to bear both the health risks and the financial costs on their own. Thus, somatic coping enables workers to preserve their immediate capacity to work, but shifts the longer-term health costs of precarious employment onto their own bodies.

4.7. INFORMAL SAFETY NETS: CREDIT, DIVERSIFICATION AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

When formal institutions fail to provide effective protection, workers develop informal mechanisms to cope with economic insecurity. These are not just financial arrangements but are deeply social in nature. In the informal labour market, such as construction, where laws are often weak or poorly enforced, the thikadar (contractor) becomes more than just an employer;

he becomes a key source of support during emergencies. Our qualitative findings show that “emergency advances” act as a fragile form of insurance, helping workers cope with crises that the state fails to address.

If there is a medical emergency at home, we don’t have any source other than going to the thikadar. He gives the money in the form of advances but then we are tied. It is a debt we have to work off, that too without questioning the conditions. If we are asked to work long hours- we have to, we can’t restrain. (FGD 5, Guwahati)

While these advances provide immediate relief during acute shocks, they also create a debt trap that limits workers’ occupational mobility and bargaining power. The worker’s dependence on the contractor, therefore, becomes self-reinforcing. The same credit that helps them manage an emergency also binds them to the contractor and conditions of work they may otherwise seek to leave. Thus, informal credit becomes both a means of enduring precarity and a mechanism for sustaining its continuity.

Beyond the site, household occupational diversification provides another way of enduring income precarity. Given the “unstable employment” in construction, families often distribute their labour across various sectors to ensure a continuous, albeit small, cash flow. This instability arises from the project-based and contractor-mediated nature of construction work, where employment is often temporary and can be interrupted when projects end, when work is delayed, or when weather conditions disrupt construction. Thus, diversification acts as a secondary safety net that buffers the household when construction work halts due to bad weather or injury.

My household is on the site, but I run a small tea stall near the labour camp. On days when his work stops or the thikadar delays the payment, my small earnings keep the house running. (Interview 6, Female, Dibrugarh)

This narrative demonstrates how female labour provides a liquidity buffer when construction work is interrupted or when payments are delayed. Similarly, younger male workers increasingly engage in the gig economy, working as bike taxi riders or food delivery boys to provide a more immediate source of daily income.

After construction work, I start working at delivery app, where I deliver foods for around 3 to 4 hours in the evening hours. This gives me a more stable life in terms of money, but I often feel exhausted, and my back started hurting a lot recently. (Interview 10, Male, Guwahati)

Thus, diversification spreads income risk but may also extend the working day and intensify bodily strain. Additionally, it may blur the boundaries between work and rest, further reducing opportunities for physical recovery. Peer networks provide another way of enduring precarity by pooling resources and reducing the costs of everyday survival. Our data shows that, on average, about 11.37 workers share a single room. Rather than seeing this only as a hardship, workers turn it into an advantage. By sharing rent and food expenses, they reduce individual costs and can send a larger portion of their income back to their families.

We stay together in these tents. If one of us falls sick and cannot go to work, the others will share their meal with him. We have to look out for each other because

no one else is looking for us. (FGD 4, Guwahati)

Such collective support provides immediate protection against income and consumption shocks, but it also allows workers to compensate privately for inadequate housing and weak institutional support.

Together, these informal mechanisms enable workers to absorb and manage everyday shocks, but they also shift the burden of social protection from formal institutions to workers, households, and their networks.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings highlight a persistent decoupling between formal policy frameworks and the everyday realities of informal construction workers in Assam. Consistent with broader studies on construction labour, our sample is predominantly young, migrant, and low-educated (Deshingkar, 2017; Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016), which helps explain both its absorptive role in urban economies and its exposure to structural precarity (Swider, 2015). The concentration of young migrants in physically demanding, low-skill tasks reinforces earlier arguments that the sector functions as a labour reservoir for those with limited occupational mobility (Bremen, 1996; Srivastava, 2020). Crucially, the high prevalence of youth in our sample (58.2% aged 15-29) suggests that “enduring precarity” relies on the intensive extraction of “fresh” bodily capital, where young workers are recruited to sustain levels of physical strain that older bodies can no longer endure. Youth itself, therefore, becomes an economic resource in the precarious construction sector, as workers’ physical capacity temporarily substitutes for the employment security, skill protection, and social protection that formal labour relations would otherwise provide.

Working-time patterns and site hazards in this study corroborate existing evidence about the intensity and informality of construction work. Reported mean hours, widespread unpaid overtime, night work, and frequent exposure to heat, dust, falls and heavy lifting echo findings from other Indian and Global South contexts that document wage insecurity and occupational hazards in the sector (Tiwary et al., 2013; Gopalakrishnan & Kumar, 2020; Goswami, 2024). The gap between the reported availability of PPE and its effective use, together with the near-absence of training, highlights the weak enforcement of occupational health and safety standards, as described by Pattenden (2018), Dhal (2020), and Jha (2021).

Poor housing, sanitation and shared living arrangements amplify health risks identified at worksites. High rates of on-site residence, overcrowding (average 11.37 persons/room), shared toilets, and open bathing indicate poor living conditions that may contribute to respiratory and other health problems among informal workers (Dhal, 2020; Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016; Gopalakrishnan & Kumar, 2020). Our finding of substantial out-of-pocket health expenditure (mean annual INR 11,643.36) further demonstrates how inadequate social protection translates into catastrophic or high-burden healthcare spending, consistent with studies highlighting the financial fragility of informal labourers (Bhoi et al., 2022).

Despite the presence of welfare schemes, there is a clear gap in implementation. This reflects findings from other studies that such schemes often fail to reach highly mobile informal work-

ers because their design does not match the nature of their work (John, 2004; Jha, 2021). Importantly, our evidence shows that this is not just due to digital illiteracy or lack of awareness, as propounded by John (2004), but a deeper mismatch between how institutions function and how workers live and work.

This contrast in institutional reach also helps explain differences in how workers endure precarity across the Global North and Global South. In the Global North, where relatively stronger labour-market and welfare institutions may provide formal avenues of support, workers' responses to insecurity often include more individualised and psychosocial strategies, such as cognitive and behavioural coping (Langdon & Sawang, 2018), stoicism (Roche et al., 2025), and the use of workplace or welfare support mechanisms (Langdon & Sawang, 2018). In contrast, in the Global South, where informal employment and fragmented social protection are more deeply embedded, workers often rely on broader informal mechanisms to sustain livelihoods, including kinship and community networks, informal credit, occupational and spatial mobility, household diversification, and bodily endurance (Ellis, 2000; Waite, 2007; Agarwala, 2008; Boccagni, 2015; De Haas, 2021; Alowais & Suliman, 2025). Thus, while coping in the North often involves managing the consequences of employment insecurity within existing institutional structures, coping in the South frequently involves constructing alternative sources of income, care, credit and protection where institutional support is limited.

Qualitative narratives of somatic coping and substance use add to the prior work on survival strategies in informal labour markets. Rather than mere recreation, these practices reflect forms of bodily management through which workers sustain physical endurance and maintain employability under extreme working conditions. This mirrors earlier studies showing that such use is often linked to the demands of labour among insecure workers (Bowen et al., 2014; Frimpong et al., 2022).

Economic relations with thikadars (contractors) operate as an informal safety net and a mechanism of control. Emergency advances provide short-term liquidity but create debt-bonds that constrain mobility and bargaining power, reinforcing earlier accounts of contractor-mediated dependency in subcontracted labour chains (Alowais & Suliman, 2025). At the household level, workers' adaptive strategies, occupational diversification, gig work, and dense pooling of resources demonstrate how social capital and multi-job holding mitigate shocks but cannot substitute for durable institutional protection (Ellis, 2000; Boccagni, 2015).

The burden of enduring precarity also extends beyond individual workers and is deeply gendered through social reproduction. While the workforce is predominantly male (94.9%), the qualitative evidence suggests that women also absorb economic and social risks through household labour. The account of a wife's tea stall providing a liquidity buffer during contractor delays illustrates how female labour helps sustain households when construction income is interrupted. This extends the idea of enduring precarity beyond individual workers, showing how households, and particularly women's labour, absorb shocks that formal institutions often fail to address (Agarwala, 2013; Mezzadri, 2020).

Taken together, the findings suggest that enduring precarity reflects a reorganisation of contemporary labour relations in which workers increasingly absorb risks that formal institutions and employment relationships do not adequately address. Contractor credit, livelihood diver-

sification and informal networks provide temporary forms of security, while the mobilisation of fresh bodily capital enables young workers to remain employable despite hazardous conditions. The case of ABOCWVB further shows that the challenge is not simply the absence of social protection, but the limited ability of existing institutions to reach a mobile, contractor-mediated workforce. The broader contribution of the study, therefore, lies in showing how workers' informal mechanisms of survival sustain livelihoods while also allowing precarious labour relations to persist.

6. CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of informal construction workers across selected cities of Assam reveal a deeply entrenched landscape of vulnerability. Their marginalisation is structural, as workers remain inadequately covered by formal social protection and are forced to absorb economic and health shocks privately. The study contributes by showing how workers endure precarity through somatic strategies, contractor-based credit, livelihood diversification, household support and collective resource pooling. While these mechanisms provide immediate protection, they may also sustain dependence on informal labour relations. However, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design and narrow geographic scope. Therefore, future research can adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches to better capture evolving lived experiences and coping strategies.

To address these vulnerabilities, policy response could shift from welfare design to effective frontline implementation. Registration for e-Shram and ABOCWVB could be simplified and supported by ground-level outreach. Since contractors often provide emergency credit, welfare systems could also improve workers' access to affordable credit. Labour unions could strengthen their site-level outreach, while urban development projects could incorporate provisions for secure shelters, clean drinking water, and safely managed sanitation. Until statutory labour rights are effectively implemented at the worksite, workers will continue to bear the costs of enduring precarity.

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