

Living and Working Realities of Migrant Garment Workers in Urban India: A Study of Delhi-NCR

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ABSTRACT

The garment industry is one of the major sources of employment for migrant workers in urban India. A large proportion of workers in this sector migrate from economically weaker regions in search of better livelihood opportunities. However, despite providing employment, the industry is often associated with informal work arrangements and difficult living conditions. Understanding the socio-economic background and employment realities of garment workers is important for addressing issues related to labour welfare and urban inequality. The present study aims to examine the socio-economic profile, migration background, housing conditions, access to basic amenities, and employment patterns of garment industry workers in the Delhi–NCR region. The study is based on primary data collected from garment workers using structured interviews. Descriptive analysis was used to examine key socio-economic and employment characteristics of the respondents. The findings reveal that the garment workforce is largely dominated by migrant workers, particularly from economically weaker states. Most workers live in rented accommodations located in slum settlements, where overcrowding, sanitation problems, water shortages, and high rent are common. Access to basic amenities such as tap water and private sanitation facilities remains limited for many households. The study also highlights that employment in the garment industry is largely informal, with the majority of workers engaged in contractual, casual, or piece-rate work without job security or formal benefits.

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INTRODUCTION

The garment industry is one of the fastest-growing labour-intensive sectors in India (Das et al., 2015) and plays an important role in generating employment, particularly for workers with limited education and skills (Paul-Majumder & Zohir, 1994). Over the past few decades, the expansion of garment production in urban industrial centres such as Delhi–NCR has created significant employment opportunities for large numbers of workers migrating from rural areas (Une, 2024). The industry contributes substantially to the national economy and export earnings while also functioning as a major source of livelihood for economically vulnerable populations (Une, 2024; Verma, 2002). Its labour-intensive nature makes it accessible to individuals who may not have formal training or higher levels of education (Das et al., 2015), thereby attracting workers from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Migration has become a defining feature of labour participation in the garment sector (Verma, 2002; Wickramasekara, 2013). Many workers migrate from economically weaker states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal in search of stable employment and improved income opportunities (Das et al., 2015; Datta, 2020; Mohanty et al., 2016). Limited agricultural productivity, declining rural employment, and lack of alternative livelihood options often push individuals to leave their native places and move to urban centres (Datta, 2020). Social networks, including relatives and friends already working in garment factories, play a crucial role in facilitating this movement by helping new migrants secure employment. For many workers, migration is not a temporary arrangement but a long-term livelihood strategy that shapes their social and economic lives (Datta, 2020; Wickramasekara, 2013).

Despite the availability of employment, work in the garment industry is largely characterised by informal labour arrangements. A significant proportion of workers are engaged under contractual, casual, or piece-rate systems, often without written contracts or formal employment benefits (Anner & Dutta, 2019; Unni & Bali, 2002). Such arrangements provide flexibility to employers but create uncertainty for workers, as job security, stable wages, and access to social protection remain limited (Une, 2024). The absence of formal labour protections increases workers' vulnerability and restricts their

ability to negotiate better working conditions (Paul-Majumder & Zohir, 1994; Unni & Bali, 2002). Urban living conditions further add to the challenges faced by garment workers (Une, 2024). Migrant workers often settle in low-income neighbourhoods or slum settlements located near industrial clusters to reduce commuting costs (Mitra, 2010). However, these settlements frequently lack adequate infrastructure and essential services such as safe housing, sanitation facilities, reliable water supply, and sufficient living space (Mitra, 2010; Une, 2024; Unni & Bali, 2002). Overcrowding, high rental costs, and limited access to basic amenities are common issues that affect the quality of life of workers and their families (Chadchan et al., 2024). These living conditions not only create physical discomfort but also influence workers' health, well-being, and overall productivity.

Although several studies have examined labour conditions in industrial sectors (Anner & Dutta, 2019; Sen & Dasgupta, 2009; Sharma, 1997), there remains a need for more context-specific research that integrates workers' socio-economic backgrounds, migration experiences, living conditions, and employment patterns within a single analytical framework. Many existing studies focus either on workplace conditions (Chadchan et al., 2024; Une, 2024; Unni & Bali, 2002) or migration patterns (Datta, 2020; Mitra, 2010; Mohanty et al., 2016) separately, without fully exploring how these factors interact to shape workers' everyday realities. There is also limited empirical research that documents the combined impact of urban living conditions and informal employment on the well-being of migrant garment workers in rapidly expanding industrial regions such as Delhi–NCR.

In this context, the present study aims to examine the socio-economic profile, migration patterns, housing conditions, access to basic amenities, and employment characteristics of garment industry workers in the Delhi–NCR region. By analysing both living and working conditions together, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the everyday realities of migrant workers engaged in the garment sector. The findings are expected to contribute to ongoing discussions on labour welfare, urban inequality, and the need for policy interventions aimed at improving the living and working conditions of migrant workers in urban industrial settings.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to understand the socio-economic background and employment realities of garment industry workers in the Delhi–NCR region. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- **To examine the socio-economic profile and migration patterns of garment industry workers**
- **To assess the housing conditions, access to basic amenities and everyday living conditions of garment industry workers**
- **To analyze the employment patterns, nature of work, and working challenges faced by garment industry workers**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study follows a descriptive and explanatory research design to understand the living and working conditions of garment sector workers in the Delhi–NCR region. The descriptive approach was used to document the socio-economic characteristics, housing conditions, and employment patterns of workers, while the explanatory design helped in examining the factors influencing their living conditions and the nature of work in the garment industry (Clark & Creswell, 2008). The study also explored the role of trade unions in shaping workers' experiences and working conditions in the ready-made garment sector. The study was conducted in selected garment industrial areas located in the Delhi–NCR region. These areas attract a large number of migrant workers due to the availability of employment opportunities in small and medium-sized garment units. The study area was selected because of its high concentration of garment workers and the presence of diverse employment arrangements within the sector.

A combination of random and purposive sampling techniques was used for selecting respondents. Random sampling helped ensure broader representation of workers, while purposive sampling was used to include respondents who had relevant experience in garment-related work (Clark & Creswell, 2008). A total of 100 respondents were included in the study. The respondents consisted of garment workers employed in different types of job roles within the industry. In addition to workers, key informants such as trade union representatives, experts, and government officials were also included to gain deeper insights into labour conditions and institutional support mechanisms.

Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. Primary data were collected using pre-designed questionnaires, which included questions related to socio-economic background, migration history, housing conditions, employment characteristics, and workplace experiences. The questionnaires were administered through personal interviews, allowing respondents to share their experiences in detail. Secondary data such as reports and academic research studies were used to support and contextualize the findings obtained from primary data. Quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate descriptive statistics and frequency distributions. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and key issues related to living and working conditions. The combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods helped provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic realities of garment workers (Clark & Creswell, 2008).

Ethical considerations were carefully followed throughout the study. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before data collection, and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality of personal information was maintained, and responses were used only for academic purposes. Efforts were also made to ensure that the data collection process did not interfere with the respondents' work schedules or create discomfort.

RESULTS

The findings of the study are presented in thematic form to provide a structured understanding of the socio-demographic characteristics, migration patterns, housing conditions, and employment realities of garment industry workers. The results reveal that the majority of workers are migrants engaged in informal employment and living in overcrowded housing conditions with limited access to basic amenities. Tables are used to summarize key quantitative findings and highlight major patterns across themes.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by their socio-demographic characteristics (n=100)

Theme	Indicators	Number	Percent (%)
Age Group	Below 30 years	12	12
	31–40 years	64	64
	41–50 years	22	22
	More than 50 years	2	2
Gender	Male	55	55
	Female	45	45
Marital Status	Single	5	5
	Married	87	87
	Divorced	1	1
	Other	7	7
Education Level	No formal education	47	47
	Primary	32	32
	Secondary	14	14
	Higher Secondary	2	2
	Above Higher Secondary	5	5
Religion	Hindu	96	96
	Islam	2	2
	Other	2	2

Table 1 illustrates the socio-demographic profile of the respondents working in the garment industry in study area. It shows that the majority of respondents (64%) were in the age group of 31–40 years, followed by 22% in the 41–50 years category, indicating that most workers belong to the economically productive age group. In terms of gender, 55% of respondents were male and 45% were female, showing the participation of both men and women in garment-related work. Most respondents (87%) were married, showing the presence of family responsibilities among workers. Educational levels were generally low, with 47% of respondents having no formal education and 32% having completed primary education. Religion-wise, the majority of respondents (96%) belonged to the Hindu religion, while a small proportion also belonged to Muslim and other religious groups.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by their native state and duration of migration (n=100)

Theme	Indicators	Number	Percent (%)
State	Bihar	83	83
	Uttar Pradesh	11	11
	West Bengal	2	2
	Other States	4	4
Duration of Migration	Below 10 years	19	19
	11–20 years	69	69
	More than 20 years	12	12

Tables 2 show that a large majority of respondents (83%) belonged to Bihar, indicating that this state is the primary source of migrant labour for the garment sector in the study area. This was followed by respondents from Uttar Pradesh (11%). A very small proportion of respondents belonged to West Bengal (2%) and other states (4%). The dominance of migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh highlights the pattern of interstate migration from economically weaker regions to urban industrial centres in search of employment opportunities. Table also shows the duration of migration among respondents working in the garment industry. It indicates that the majority of respondents (69%) had been living in the study area for 11–20 years, while a smaller proportion of respondents (19%) reported migrating within the last 10 years, and 12% had been residing in the area for more than 20 years.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by their housing and accommodation related characteristics (n=100)

Theme	Indicators	Number	Percent (%)
Type of House	Pucca House	12	12
	Slum	88	88
Accommodation Type	Rented	98	98
	Company Provided	1	1
	Own	1	1
Number of Rooms	1 Room	95	95
	2 Rooms	5	5

Family Size	1–2 Members	16	16
	3–4 Members	40	40
	5–6 Members	39	39
	More than 6 Members	5	5
Housing Problem	Overcrowding	100	100
	Lack of Sanitation	93	93
	High Rent	96	96
	Water Shortage	95	95
	Safety Concerns	38	38
Amenity	Electricity	96	24.6
	Tap water	15	3.8
	Shared water source	86	22.1
	Toilet inside house	10	2.6
	Community/shared toilet	80	20.5
	Cooking gas (LPG)	95	24.4
	Separate kitchen	8	2.1

Table 3 presents the housing and accommodation related characteristics of respondents. The findings reveal that a large majority of respondents (88%) were living in slum settlements, while only 12 percent reported residing in pucca houses. This indicates that most garment workers live in informal and overcrowded residential areas with limited housing security. In terms of accommodation status, the majority of respondents (98%) were living in rented houses. This shows that most workers do not have permanent housing arrangements and depend heavily on rented accommodation, which may increase their financial burden and housing insecurity. A vast majority of respondents (95%) were living in single-room dwellings, while only 5 percent reported having two rooms. In terms of family size, 40% of households had 3–4 members, followed by 39% with 5–6 members. A smaller proportion of households (16%) consisted of 1–2 members, while 5% had more than six members. The combination of larger family sizes and limited room availability suggests overcrowded living conditions among garment workers, which may affect their privacy, comfort, and overall quality of life.

Table also shows that overcrowding was reported by all respondents (100%), indicating that limited living space is a common challenge among garment worker households. A large majority of respondents also reported high rent (96%), water shortage (95%), and lack of sanitation facilities (93%), highlighting the inadequate living conditions in their residential areas. Additionally, 38% of respondents reported safety concerns, suggesting issues related to security in slum settlements. In terms of basic amenities among respondents' households, the findings show that a large proportion of households had access to electricity (96%) and cooking gas (95%), indicating that these facilities were available to most respondents. However, access to other essential services was limited. Only 15% of households had access to tap water, while a majority (86%) depended on shared water sources, reflecting reliance on common facilities. Similarly, only 10% of households had a toilet within the house, whereas 80% depended on community or shared toilets. In addition, only 8% of respondents reported having a separate kitchen, suggesting that cooking and living activities often take place in the same room.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents by their distance from workplace, mode of transport and commuting difficulties (n=100)

Theme	Indicators	Number	Percent (%)
Distance from Workplace	Less than 1 km	49	49
	1–3 km	43	43
	More than 3 km	8	8
Mode of Transport	Walk	77	77
	Bicycle	10	10
	Shared Auto	13	13
Commuting Difficulties	Yes	18	18
	No	82	82

Table 4 presents the commuting distance and mode of transport used by respondents to reach their workplace. The numbers indicate that nearly half of the respondents (49%) lived less than 1KM from their workplace, while 43% travelled a distance of 1–3KM. Only a small proportion (8%) reported travelling more than 3KM. With regard to mode of transport, 77% reported walking to work, followed by 13% who used shared auto-rickshaws, and 10% who used

bicycles. In terms of commuting difficulties, most respondents (82%) reported no major difficulties, while 18% reported experiencing some challenges during their commute. The findings show that proximity to the workplace plays an important role in shaping commuting patterns among garment workers.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents by years of experience, reasons for entry into work, type of employment and hiring authority (n = 100)

Theme	Indicators	Number	Percent (%)
Years of Experience	1–5 years	16	16
	6–10 years	23	23
	11–15 years	36	36
	16–20 years	17	17
	More than 20 years	8	8
Reasons for Entry	Self-choice	22	22
	Lack of alternatives	74	74
	Other	4	4
Type of Employment	Permanent	3	3
	Contractual	41	41
	Casual	20	20
	Piece-rate Worker	36	36
Hiring Authority	Factory Owner	90	90
	Supervisor	9	9
	Other	1	1

The table shows that the largest proportion of respondents (36%) had 11 to 15 years of work experience, indicating long-term engagement with garment-related work. This was followed by 23% of respondents who had 6–10 years of experience and 17% who had 16–20 years of experience. 16% had 1 to 5 years of experience, while 8% reported having more than 20 years of experience in the garment industry. The table also shows that a large majority of respondents (74%) joined the garment sector due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities, indicating that entry into this sector was mainly driven by economic necessity rather than personal choice. A smaller proportion of respondents (22%) reported joining the garment industry by self-choice,

possibly due to familiarity with the work or the availability of employment through social networks. Only 4% of respondents reported other reasons for entering the sector. A substantial proportion of respondents were engaged in contractual employment (41%), followed by piece-rate work (36%), indicating that many workers are paid based on output rather than fixed wages. Additionally, 20% of respondents were employed on a casual basis, reflecting the temporary nature of their work. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents (90%) were hired directly by the factory owner, suggesting that recruitment in the garment sector largely takes place through direct and informal channels. A smaller proportion of respondents (9%) reported being hired by supervisors, while only 1% mentioned other hiring sources.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research study provide important insights into the socio-economic and living realities of migrant workers employed in the garment industry in Delhi NCR. The results highlight patterns of migration, housing insecurity, informal employment and limited access to basic services, reflecting broader structural inequalities experienced by migrant labour. This discussion section interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and attempt to situate them within the wider context of urban labour precarity and social exclusion.

One of the central findings of the study is the dominance of migrant workers originating from economically weaker states, particularly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Kumar & Kumar, 2024; Mitra, 2010; Mohan & Kumar, 2025; Nahar, 2023; Upadhyay, 2022). This pattern supports earlier studies that identify interstate migration as a key feature of labour supply in labour-intensive industries such as garments, construction, and manufacturing (Upadhyay, 2022; Wickramasekara, 2013). Migration in this context is largely driven by economic necessity, including limited livelihood opportunities, declining agricultural income, and rural poverty in source regions. The long duration of migration observed among respondents, with most workers residing in the destination area for more than a decade, suggests that migration is not temporary but rather a long-term survival strategy. This aligns with existing research that describes migration as a household-level livelihood adaptation rather than an individual choice (Das et al., 2015; Mitra, 2010; Nahar, 2023; Upadhyay, 2022). The reliance on migration as a primary means of economic

survival also indicates structural imbalances in regional development and unequal distribution of employment opportunities across states.

The findings related to housing conditions reflect a pattern of urban inequality that disproportionately affects migrant workers. A large proportion of respondents were found to be living in slum settlements and rented accommodations, often in overcrowded single-room dwellings. These conditions are consistent with previous studies that highlight the marginalisation of migrant workers in urban housing systems (Bhan et al., 2013; Kundu & Banerjee, 2018; Nahar, 2023; Upadhyay, 2022). Migrant households frequently lack access to secure housing due to limited income, absence of formal documentation, and exclusion from formal housing markets (Rasul & Sharma, 2014; Wickramasekara, 2013). Overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and high rental costs reported in the study further demonstrate the everyday struggles associated with urban poverty. Such living conditions not only affect physical health but also contribute to psychological stress and reduced quality of life (Bhan et al., 2013; Das et al., 2015; Lucci et al., 2018; Une, 2024). The dependence on informal settlements also reflects the failure of urban planning systems to accommodate the growing population of migrant labourers.

Access to basic amenities emerged as another area of concern. Although electricity and cooking gas were available to most respondents, access to essential services such as safe drinking water, private sanitation, and separate cooking spaces remained limited (Jayaram & Varma, 2020; Kundu & Banerjee, 2018; Lucci et al., 2018; Singh, 2019; Unni & Bali, 2002). The dependence on shared water sources and community toilets indicates infrastructural inadequacies in low-income urban settlements. These findings correspond with earlier research that links poor access to basic services with increased health risks among migrant populations (Verma, 2002). Limited sanitation and water facilities contribute to the spread of communicable diseases and create unsafe living environments, particularly for women and children. The lack of private space within households also reflects gendered vulnerabilities, as women often face additional challenges in managing household responsibilities under constrained living conditions (Sen & Dasgupta, 2009; Sharma, 1997).

Employment-related findings highlight the widespread prevalence of informal labour arrangements in the garment industry. The majority of respondents were engaged in contractual, casual, or piece-rate employment, with very few workers holding permanent positions (Rasul & Sharma, 2014;

Une, 2024; Verma, 2002). This pattern is consistent with studies that describe the garment sector as a highly informalised industry characterised by flexible labour arrangements and minimal worker protection. Informal employment structures allow employers to reduce labour costs while shifting risks onto workers. Piece-rate payment systems, in particular, increase production pressure and income uncertainty, making workers more vulnerable to economic instability. The absence of formal contracts and limited access to social security benefits further reinforces employment insecurity and restricts workers' ability to negotiate better working conditions (Anner & Dutta, 2019; Barik et al., 2024; Farooqui & Pandey, 2020).

The role of informal recruitment practices also emerged as a significant feature of labour organisation in the garment sector. Most respondents reported being hired directly by factory owners or supervisors, often through personal contacts or informal networks. This reliance on informal hiring channels reflects the absence of institutionalised recruitment systems and contributes to the lack of transparency in employment arrangements (Hale & Wills, 2011; Sharma, 1997). Similar patterns have been observed in earlier studies, where migrant workers depend on kinship and community networks to secure employment in unfamiliar urban environments. While such networks provide initial support, they may also reinforce dependency and limit workers' mobility across occupations. The study also highlights the vulnerability of migrant workers within the urban labour market. Limited education levels among respondents restrict their access to skilled employment opportunities and confine them to low-paying, labour-intensive jobs. The concentration of workers within specific age groups further indicates the physically demanding nature of garment work, which may not be sustainable in the long term. The lack of upward mobility and skill development opportunities contributes to the persistence of poverty among migrant households (Lucci et al., 2018; Mohanty et al., 2016; Sen & Dasgupta, 2009; Wickramasekara, 2013). These findings align with theoretical perspectives on labour precarity, which emphasise the unstable and insecure nature of employment experienced by marginalised workers in globalising economies.

Social exclusion emerges as an underlying theme across multiple findings of the study. Migrant workers often remain excluded from formal housing systems, social protection schemes, and urban welfare services due to documentation barriers and administrative challenges (Vonk & Van Walsum, 2013). Their

marginal position within urban spaces reflects broader processes of socio-economic inequality and unequal access to resources. The clustering of migrant workers in low-income settlements near industrial areas further reinforces spatial segregation and limits their access to better living environments. Such patterns illustrate the structural nature of inequality rather than individual-level limitations. Urban labour precarity, as observed in the study, reflects the intersection of insecure employment, poor housing, and limited social protection (Mohan & Kumar, 2025; Sharma, 1997; Une, 2024; Upadhyay, 2022; Vonk & Van Walsum, 2013). The proximity of residential areas to workplaces, while reducing commuting costs, often forces workers to reside in congested and poorly serviced neighbourhoods. This trade-off between affordability and living quality demonstrates the constrained choices available to low-income migrant households. The persistence of informal labour arrangements and inadequate urban infrastructure indicates the need for policy interventions that address both employment security and living conditions (Anner & Dutta, 2019; Barik et al., 2024; Bhan et al., 2013; Farooqui & Pandey, 2020; Kidd, 2017; Kundu & Banerjee, 2018; Sharma, 1997; Une, 2024; Vonk & Van Walsum, 2013). The findings of the present study reinforce existing evidence on the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant garment workers in urban India. The patterns observed in migration, housing, employment and service access highlight the interconnected nature of labour precarity and urban inequality. By situating individual experiences within broader socio-economic structures, the study underscores the importance of addressing systemic barriers that limit the well-being and social inclusion of migrant labour populations.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the socio-economic profile, migration patterns, housing conditions, and employment characteristics of migrant workers engaged in the garment industry. The findings reveal that the garment workforce is largely composed of long-term migrants from economically weaker states, particularly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who depend on urban industrial employment as a primary source of livelihood. Most workers were found to belong to the economically productive age group, had low levels of education, and carried significant family responsibilities, reflecting their dependence on labour-intensive work for household survival. The study highlights several structural challenges faced by migrant garment workers, particularly in relation

to housing and employment. A majority of respondents were living in rented accommodations within slum settlements, characterised by overcrowding, limited living space, and inadequate sanitation facilities. Although electricity and cooking fuel were widely available, access to safe drinking water, private sanitation, and separate kitchen spaces remained limited. Employment-related findings further indicate the dominance of informal labour arrangements within the garment sector. Most workers were engaged in contractual, casual, or piece-rate employment, with very few having access to permanent positions. Such employment structures contribute to job insecurity, income instability, and limited access to social protection benefits. The reliance on informal recruitment practices and the absence of written contracts further increase worker vulnerability and reduce their capacity to claim labour rights.

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