

A Day In The Life Of Nagamma

Migrant Construction Worker

by Hema Nair

TWENTY five year old Nagamma was going to be a mother for the fifth time. In the dark, airless, four by seven foot hovel she called home, Nagamma sat on her haunches, gripping a pole that propped up the ceiling. An old woman who lived a few houses away, pressed down on her back with a powerful grip.

Childbirth was a normal happening in this crowded, garbage strewn colony which sprawled behind a towering building complex. It was nearly completed now after four years of hard labour by Nagamma, her husband Mani and 398 other workers. When the time for giving

birth to a child came, the women in this colony of migrant workers just called in one of the old women who lived in the colony to help them. Very rarely did any of them go to a hospital to give birth. Hospitals were too far from the colony and no one knew the bus route to go there. Besides, hospitals made you agree to undergo operations that could harm you. But in many of the births in the colony, the babies came out dead. It was because of the heavy loads they carried, the old women told them. Maybe it was so. Who knew?

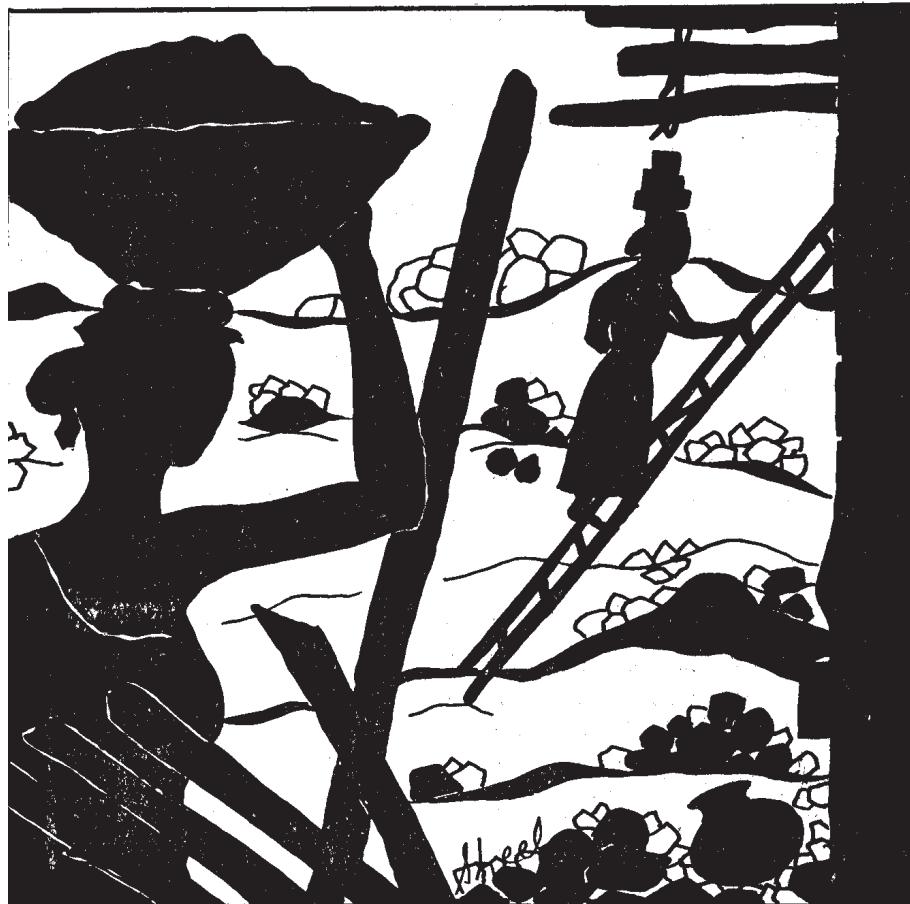
Nagamma felt her child had come too

early this time. When she had got up in the morning there had been no pain. In fact she had done all her routine jobs. After waiting for nearly two hours in the queue for water, she had collected her quota in a bucket and a heavy metal pot. Balancing the pot on her head and holding the bucket in one hand, she had come home and woken up the children—Bhama, Raju, Lakshni and two year old Babu.

She cleaned their faces with water from the bucket. A proper bath was possible only when they visited their village in Gulbarga once a year. Sometimes the women in the colony didn't clean their bodies for six months. They had no room in which to have a bath. The women had to sit inside their homes and bathe. The water would run out into the next houses as they were all built so closely together. The neighbours would get angry and a fight would start. Anyway, Nagamma always felt, what was the point in having a bath and wasting all that precious water? The minute they went back to the site, the dust and cement would cover them from head to toe.

After the children were washed, she had hurried to cook the morning and afternoon meal. The mud *chulha* was set in one side of the thatched wall. As soon as she lit it with the fuel they bought from the contractor, the small hut grew smoky and everybody's eyes began to water. Quickly she boiled a little water with some tea leaves and gave a cup to Mani. From a little plastic cup all of the children had a few sips each. Most days, Nagamma never got any tea but she didn't even notice as she had already begun making the hard, dry *rotis* for their meals. She had to finish making them before 9 a.m. when she had to report to the site.

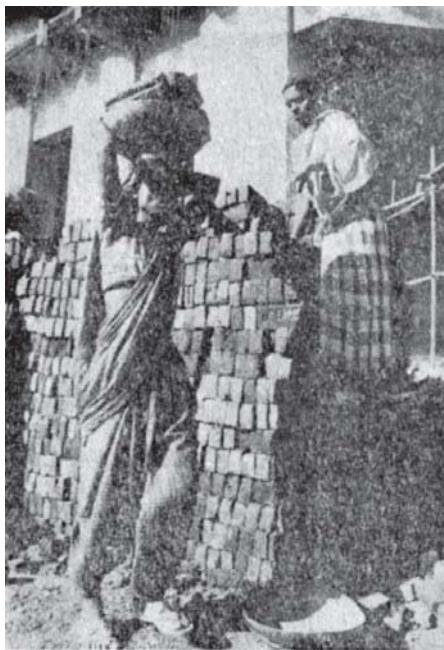
This morning she had reached the site a little late because she had stopped to scold Bhama for not looking after Babu properly. Yesterday, he had fallen and cut his legs. If only she could leave the children in a creche like the one she had seen at the earlier site they had worked on. But here the contractor said they had no space for a creche. When she went to



the supervisor, the other women had already been allotted their work for the day. Normally the supervisor tried to give her jobs like minding the water pump or coiling the wires of the lift as it came down. These jobs didn't tire her so much as there was no lifting and walking up and down the stairs. This supervisor was a kind man. But this morning, since she was late, other women had taken these jobs and he told her to go to the eleventh floor and scrub and polish the bathroom floor.

It was tiring work. She had to kneel or sit on her heels and scrub the floor hard. In both positions, her big, swollen stomach pulled painfully and made her catch her breath at every movement of her hand. Every half an hour, she had to get up and fetch a fresh bucket of water. The floor was very dirty with mud, plaster and cement marks all over the marbled surface. She had to first wipe the floor and then use the brush. In an hour, her back had begun to throb with pain. It grew steadily. Hoping the supervisor wouldn't come, she had rested once or twice against the wall.

Sitting there, with hands massaging her spine, her eyes had wandered round the room. There was still a lot of work to be done but gleaming taps, sinks and a Western style toilet had already been fitted in. How would it be, she had thought, to use such a room? There was not even one toilet in the colony. Everyone just used



the open space behind their houses. It made the whole area very smelly and full of flies but they had got used to both. The men, at least, could even go during the day. But the women could only go early in the dawn or late at night. Sitting in full view of the entire colony made the women feel very shy. Sometimes, though it was very painful to control the urge until dark came.

By afternoon her backache had spread to her stomach. Spasms of pain had shot through her, making it impossible to even

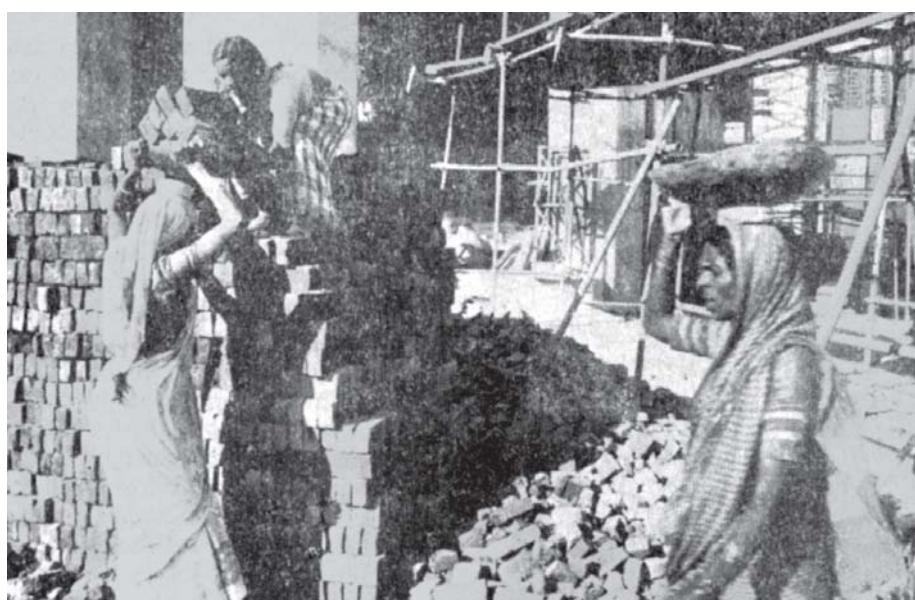
raise the brush. She wanted to lie down there in all that muddy water and never get up. At 1 p.m. when the workers left for lunch, she managed to get down the sleep, dirt covered steps. On the second floor she met Krishna who had been polishing the bathroom there. Krishna promised to tell the supervisor that Nagamma would not be coming back in the afternoon.

When she had reached the house, Bhama, 10 years old and beginning to take her mother's place in the housework, had already served food to the others. She had just lain down and told Bhama to call the old woman and to mind the children outside the house for the rest of the day. Mani had understood at once. Just five more days to get the pay, he had remarked, couldn't you wait till then?

She had understood his bitterness. Less pay meant there would barely be one meal for all of them till their next wages came. Every fortnight the contractor paid them Rs 390—Rs 11 per day to Nagamma and Rs 15 per day to Mani even though both of them did the same work, called *bigari*. Out of that sum, Rs 10 had to be paid towards returning a loan they had taken from the agent and Rs 20 for the rent of the house and the water and fuel the contractor provided. That left them Rs 360 a fortnight—to feed and clothe six of them.

They had no ration card. Once, all the workers had gone and requested the contractor to help them get one. But he had refused. Later, his agent had told them he had refused because he feared that the ration cards would make the workers claim that the site was their permanent home. So Nagamma bought her food from a nearby grocer where even the cheapest rice was Rs 3 per kilo. Their food costs, including the glass of thin watery milk she got once in a while, came up to Rs 250. Then Mani kept Rs 20 or so with him for *bidi* and tea at the pavement stall.

Nagamma had been able to save only Rs 100 in all these months for the expenses after childbirth. She would have to give some money to the old woman and this time she was determined to have at least half a cup of milk every day for at least 15





days. After Babu's birth she had become very weak. Though none of her children had been born in a hospital she had never

felt it had affected her health. Bhama and Raju had been born in the village and Lakshmi and Babu on the site. She had

rested at home for a month for all the other children but after Babu's birth she went back to work in 10 days because they had needed money very badly those days. From that time her back had begun to hurt - it hurt as if it would split into two. She had gone to a doctor who had his clinic just near the site. He had given her some pills and taken Rs 15. The pills had not cured the pain and her money had been wasted.

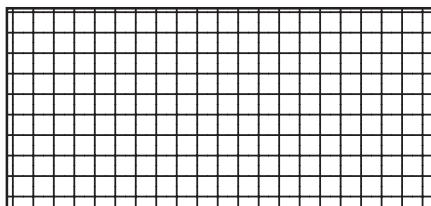
From that day she didn't trust doctors. They just want to grab your money. Nor were those big hospitals any better. Look at the condition of that *bigari* worker, Manorbai. She had gone to deliver her baby at the big hospital. There, the doctor urged her to have an operation which would stop her from having more children. He also promised to give her Rs 100. Her husband and she fell for the bribe. Half the money went in paying for the taxi that brought her home. And after five days she grew so weak that she could not open her eyes or move her body. She just lay on the floor like a dead person. Finally, her husband took her back to the hospital. And now, two months later, she was still there. They had to give her food through a tube in her nose. Her husband, half mad with worry, did not do any work but just lay around the site, drunk. And her four small children roamed around and colony like beggars - dirty and unfed.

After hearing about Manorbai, Mani had told Nagamma that he would never let her have such an operation. Nagamma had agreed but had also wished that she could stop having more children. It was not such a problem for Mani. He didn't have to carry the growing weight of the unborn child and do all the work at home and at the site. He did not realise how much strength the work at the site demanded. The women had to work in any weather—under the blazing sun or heavy rain. The weather made no difference to the construction of the building. The women had to do most of the carrying work. While the foundation of a building was being laid, the earth, stones and subsoil water had to be carried

and thrown away. Once construction began, the cement, bricks and mortar had to be carried to wherever they were needed. Women also had to help crush bricks and mix cement. The work would go on all day—from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. except for one hour in the afternoon. After a whole day's work of carrying heavy weights, Nagamma felt her hands and back would break. Each day she never knew how she found the energy to go back and start lifting all over again.

Even if the work was cruelly heavy it was better than the work in the fields that she used to do in the village. There, even though she worked the whole day, the wages were never more than Rs 3. And once the drought came, even that work was not available. It was Mani's cousin who told them to come to the city. For illiterate people like Mani and she who had never been to a school, this was the only work they could get. That is why she never let Raju miss even a day of the municipal school he went to. She would never let her children work like this. Not only was it tiring but it could be dangerous too. Like the accident Mani had last year. He had fallen from a height but luckily had only broken his leg. The contractor had taken him to a doctor who had charged Rs 200. Even today they were paying back Rs 10 every month to the contractor. Some of the workers had told them that the law was that the contractor had to pay the medical expenses for the injuries a worker got while he was on the site. But who would dare tell the contractor that? He controlled their jobs and if they displeased him, he would throw them out even after they had worked with him for so many years.

Today, she was laying down a burden she had carried for nine months. Maybe some day she could lay down the other load—of earth, stones and concrete—for the last time?



Construction Labour in Delhi

A survey of 2,000 women construction workers at 12 sites by the National Institute of Urban Affairs in 1982 found that:

97 percent of the women belonged to scheduled castes

95 percent had obtained the job through a contractor's agent 61 percent had migrated from Rajasthan; 20 percent from UP and 16 percent from MP

100 percent had migrated to earn a living.

74 percent were between 16 and 35 years old; 90 percent were married; all except one were illiterate.

All the women were known as unskilled workers

98 percent were in the temporary workers category

70 percent did manual work including breaking stones and mixing cement

90 percent worked eight hours a day, with a one hour break

86 percent had no rent room; 96 percent had no canteen; 55 percent had no drinking water facility; none had toilet facilities; none had paid leave, not even for injuries sustained on the site, or for childbirth.

50 percent of pregnant women worked till the last day

Only one of the 12 sites had a creche

83 percent earned Rs 8.25 a day

Two percent earned the prescribed daily wage of Rs 9.25

83 percent paid Re 1 a day to the contractor's agent

96 percent had housing provided by the contractors, which was devoid of drainage, sewage, light, ventilation, toilets and bathing space

95 percent did not have ration cards

72 percent desired to continue living in Delhi despite the hardships.

Even on government aided construction sites, rules were flouted.

Conditions were barely different from what a survey had found 27 years earlier

Construction Labour In Bombay

A survey by Mobile Creeches of 3159 women and 3931 men construction workers on 17 sites in January 1983 found that :

56 percent had migrated from Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra 32 percent of the women were between 21 and 35 years old ; 4,6 percent of adult females were literate; 93 percent of adult females were married.

All the women worked as load lifters

Nearly 82 percent workers were classified as temporary.

70 percent of workers worked six days a week ; 18 percent worked seven days a week. Of the women who do unskilled labour only 26 percent were paid the prescribed wage of Rs 11.20 a day; 81 percent get Rs 6.10 a day. Of the 1039 unskilled male workers, only 144 men earn Rs 6.10 a day; 1154 men get Rs 11.20 a day.

All the families surveyed live on the site; nearly 80 percent do not have ration cards; toilets, drainage, light and ventilation is not provided in most cases. 55 percent preferred to settle in Bombay.

Of the 17 sites, one site had a union and these workers got paid leave, accident compensation and relatively better working conditions.

Under the Contract Labour Central Rules, 1971, the contractor is supposed to supply wholesome water and toilets on the site, and, if work continues more than three months, a creche and rest rooms. The dwellings should have a minimum height of seven feet and floor space of 30 square feet per individual, a kitchen one toilet per four individuals and separate bathing facilities for women. But these rules are generally flouted, even on government funded construction sites.