



# *Connecting Workers to Opportunities:* **Matching Migrant Workers to Affordable Housing in India**

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Close up of a community 'champion' with Bandhu Urban Tech, showing other women champions how to use the Bandhu app at their housing complex in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. ©AlishaVasudev

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# CASE STUDY

Connecting Workers to Opportunities:  
Matching Migrant Workers to Affordable Housing in India

## AT A GLANCE

<b>Company</b>	Bandhu Tech Inc.
<b>Social theme(s)</b>	Enterprise Development/Financial Inclusion; Homelessness & Housing Geography
<b>Geography</b>	India
<b>Year founded</b>	2020
<b>Revenues</b>	<€1 million annually
<b>Legal structure</b>	For-profit organization
<b>Clients</b>	<b>B2C:</b> Workers & Residents—Inter-state migrant workers seeking housing for their families; Residents who have extra rooms and houses to let for extra income. <b>B2B:</b> Large employers – Bandhu helps large employers find housing for their workers; this channel helps Bandhu monetise as familiarity is built within worker communities
<b>Business model</b>	30% of revenue from sales and consulting; remaining income from investors, grants, and startup prize winnings
<b>Product/services</b>	Bandhu delivers an AI-enhanced mobile technology platform that aggregates supply and demand for migrant housing as well as on-the-ground community ‘champions’ who increase the housing supply for migrant workers.
<b>Impact reach</b>	130K who have accessed the platform to browse housing opportunities: 60K workers who have secured housing

## Background

Many countries will experience increases in internal migration over the coming decades as rural workers move to cities in search of work. In India, there are ~600 million internal migrants, mostly working in the informal sector.<sup>1</sup> These workers are essential to the economy, contributing 10% of GDP, but often have the least power to negotiate for housing and higher wages.<sup>2</sup>

Providing secure jobs and affordable housing for future workforces is a challenge and opportunity for cities. When migrant workers arrive in new cities, they often face high living costs and difficulties applying for social welfare benefits. Without friends and family members, these workers find it difficult to find low-cost housing and job opportunities. However, with access to housing and jobs, they can grow the economies of cities and contribute to household wealth.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9986126/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-migrant-millions-caught-between-jobless-villages-city-hazards-2023-04>

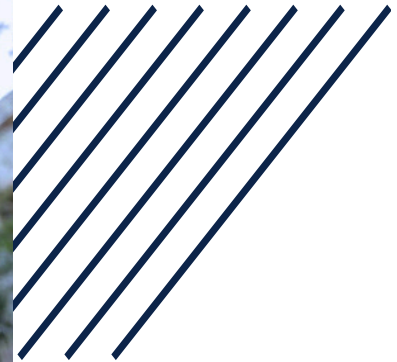
## About the Company

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Bandhu was founded by MIT graduate students **Rushil Palavajjhala, Jacob Kohn** and **Darsh Shah** in 2020 as part of the MIT DesignX Accelerator. Seeing the gap in information access for migrant workers, they developed a mobile platform that connects workers immigrating to cities with low-cost housing opportunities. The platform is available as a standalone smartphone app and as an AI-powered layer on top of WhatsApp, using technology that is already familiar to mobile users while generating useful content in local languages. Bandhu also trains 'community champions' to generate new low-cost housing opportunities in neighborhoods. Workers are able to browse opportunities for free and then pay a small fee to connect to opportunities. Landlords pay a success fee when matches are made.



A migrant construction worker in Ahmedabad operating the Bandhu app on his smartphone. As a daily wage labourer, he comes to the labour 'naka' everyday hoping to get a gig for the day. ©BandhuTechInc.



## Sources of Impact

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### **Customers: Who is served?**

Bandhu serves **migrant workers arriving in cities** with high living costs, who are seeking affordable housing for their families

### **Workforce: Who is employed?**

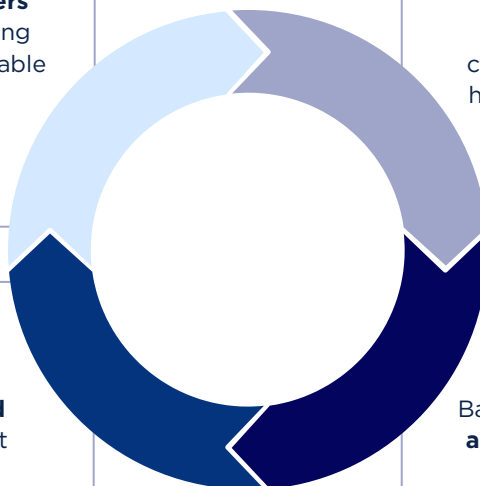
Bandhu **trains women in the community** as "community champions" who identify vacant housing, providing flexible work and performance-based pay

### **Product/Service: What is delivered?**

Bandhu develops **AI-powered chat tools** and algorithms that match migrant workers with housing opportunities that meet their needs

### **Eco-System: What relationships are developed?**

Bandhu partners with **employers and NGOs** to connect and build trust with migrant workers who are seeking housing



## Innovation Activities

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Bandhu engages in several activities that drive innovation, both in the communities it serves as well as the larger eco-system:

### INNOVATION ACTIVITIES



**Leveraging field insights for R&D:** Bandhu ensures that field and technology teams are communicating in a feedback loop that maintains simple, intuitive features for use by community champions and the migrant worker customer base.

**Open source development partnerships:** Bandhu emphasises collaborative projects with engineering teams from other firms to develop technologies that work across platforms, in contrast to seeking patent protection for proprietary technologies.

**'Boots on the ground' innovation:** Although Bandhu is a technology company, it considers its efforts in delivering services at the grassroots level—training and deploying door-to-door 'champions'—as being among its core innovations.

### Key Innovation Challenges & Learnings

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Bandhu is developing and deploying technology in environments where users have lower levels of literacy and are relatively new to smartphones. These constraints have offered both challenges and learnings:

- **Designing the user experience to cater to community needs:** Co-founder Jacob Kohn describes how they designed platform: *"Right from the beginning, we knew we needed a very visual user interface because many of these migrant workers have low levels of literacy. So we initially came up with an app that had bright color schemes, relatively few words, and very clear prompts. We're constantly making our processes more efficient and shorter. We went from 25 screens down to three to five for a particular feature."*
- **Moving from a 'patent portfolio' model to open source partnerships:** Bandhu was founded as an MIT-incubated spin-off where founders are encouraged to seek patent protection. However, co-founder Rushil Palavajjhala explains the move toward open source partnerships: *"In the MIT ecosystem, you're pushed very strongly to get a patent out as soon as possible. We got some of the best law firms to work with us, but in India, you can't copyright for this market and the technology was evolving very quickly. We thought, is it really worth the investment? We realized that it's better to build collaborative solutions, especially in our segment."*

## Featured Community Champion: Chhayaben

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“My name is Chhayaben, and I’m from Pune. I’ve been living in Ahmedabad for five years. I joined Bandhu a year ago as I was doing sewing work at home. I liked Bandhu’s work a lot and I onboarded five to six other ladies as well. Whenever we have time, we go on rounds and ask if there are any vacant rooms available. We tell landlords: ‘We work for Bandhu Housing and this will benefit you as well. If you let us know that you have an empty room but no one yet knows about it, we can inform tenants that your room is available and send the tenants to you.’ When people search on the Bandhu Housing app, they can easily find a space in whichever area they want...they can easily browse options based on their requirements...they can easily find a room and won’t be worried. They can save time and also avoid brokerage charges....and see how the room looks and whether the toilet and bathroom are in good condition. I really like working with Bandhu and I’ll continue working for them; I have benefited a lot and so have the ladies who I onboarded.”



Chhayaben, a Bandhu Champion since 2022, poses for a portrait at her sewing work table at home in Ahmedabad, India. © Alisha Vasudev