

Inspiration from abroad

INDIAN INSPIRATION

Migrant child labour in India's brick kilns

Jon Ellis

In India today, the largest single group of children engaged in labour and out of school are those migrants who leave their homes every year to spend 6–8 months in brick kilns. The number of these children is probably around 1 million.

Several states of eastern/central India contain the country's main hunger belts: Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Orissa, with parts of neighbouring states. These are places where many of the poor cannot survive for 12 months a year without migration. Rainfall is erratic and often inadequate, giving at best one crop a year and little work to labourers. Most of the poor are landless, or have too little land for subsistence. Caste relations in the countryside are still semi-feudal in many places. The government administration in these regions typically functions badly, denying the poor access to schemes and benefits they should enjoy. Government schools often function so poorly that school attendance may be of marginal benefit to children of the poor.

The kilns close during the monsoon season when making, drying and firing bricks in the open air becomes impossible. Most kilns run from November–May/June. Migrant workers are usually supplied to the kilns by labour contractors who recruit large groups comprising many families from the same village or locality. An advance is paid to heads of families, so an element of bonded labour is built into the system. Families get a weekly allowance from the kiln owner, and the balance of their wages is held on account in the owner's books until the end of the season, when workers receive the balance, minus the advance and deductions for food and fuel, if they are lucky. Few adult workers are literate and fully numerate. Owners always are.



Typically, a family group travelling several hundred miles to a kiln comprises 2 parents, several children (babies to teenagers), possibly grandparents, and maybe other branches of the same family. In an average brick kiln there may be 150 adult workers and 40–50 children under 14 years. The family's accommodation at the kiln is usually a single room about 3 x 2.5m square in a terrace of low, roughly built dwellings. A person has to stoop to enter the door. There is no furniture and no window. Everyone sleeps on mats on the earth floor. Cooking is done on a clay stove on the ground outside each door. The fuel is wood, cow

dung, straw, twigs. Water comes from a hand-pumped tube well on the site. Bathing is at the pump or in a nearby pond or river. Normally, each room now has an electric light; it may have a socket. If a toilet was provided, it is possibly never cleaned and therefore not in use.

Brick kiln owners prefer migrant workers to locals. Locals may form unions, engage in politics, and are better organized because they are in their own place with local support networks. Migrants come to maximize their income and then leave, seldom returning to the same kiln next year. They lack local support networks, are rarely unionized and are very much under the control of the owner.

Child labour is illegal in India. School attendance up to 14 years is compulsory. These are laws that India chooses not to enforce – neither the state nor society – in its brick kilns. Note that society, politicians and the administration in the vicinity of the kilns typically have no interest in the fate of the migrant workers because they have no votes in this locality, and are therefore not an interest group whose needs must be considered.

Are children forced to work? The circumstances lead all able-bodied family members to contribute to the family's earnings. Most children work to support the family output of bricks from the age of about 8 years. Children expect to contribute their labour, for self-respect and for economic benefit. Some work is relatively light – bringing sand to the adults so the clay does not stick in the mould, causing bricks to dry on the ground. Other children, particularly girls from about 10 years upward, are employed directly by the owners for carrying headloads of bricks from stacks into the kiln and out again after firing, etc. These headloads range up to 30kgs. The load is carried hundreds of times a day. Damage is undoubtedly caused to the bodies of these girls.

A brick kiln owner will say that if he prevents children from working, labourers will not remain long at his kiln. They will go to another kiln where children's labour is permitted. Owners, on an individual basis, are partly correct in their assertion. But owners belong to associations and have contact with the local government machinery, which is supposed to regulate the kilns. There is a loose coincidence of self-interest, neglect, bribe-taking to ignore infringements, and the wish of migrant workers to maximize their income.



At the vast majority of kilns there is no provision of education for the children. The language of the children is usually different from that of the local primary school, if there is one, and if the master would enrol short-term migrant children. Unlikely! There is therefore nothing to take children away from work by offering an alternative, for at least part of the day. In a few places, NGOs with funds run open-air schools or 'centres' for children for a few hours daily. For example, in the 4 districts surrounding Kolkata, NGOs have such schools/centres at about 70 kilns (out of 500+). Their existence is precarious because of funding

issues. Even where a school runs for 3 hours daily, most enrolled children over 10 years cheerfully agree to work at other times.

This writer, along with his colleagues, believe that a sustained, flexible and creative campaign is needed to advance the interests of migrant brick-kiln children. The campaign must not ignore the needs of adult workers to be organized and secure better pay and conditions. Nor must it ignore the need of children at brick kilns to receive some kind of education by whatever means possible, and ultimately the quality education they need to transform their world. In seeking to end child labour in the brick industry of India, we also seek gains in the material position of the migrating communities.

A successful 'crowd funding' appeal in September/ October 2018 (which continues) raised enough money to employ a person in Kolkata, West Bengal as 'Advocate for Migrant Children in Brick Kilns'. Rahul Das is now in this post and working. For more details see [an article](#) within reports on conditions of Labour, particularly child labour, in the brick production industries of South Asia - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Rahul and any other staff employed by the campaign work with their phones and laptops in virtual offices – their own homes, trains, tea stalls and brick kilns. Jon's flat in central Kolkata serves as a meeting point when necessary. We have a [Brick Kiln News](#), web-page, which features news items covering the brick industries of India and the rest of South Asia – Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

We are in this work for as long as necessary. We are optimistic that useful gains can be won for the children of the brick kilns in the next few years.

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Founder and main organizer of 'The brick field schools programme of Loreto'