

India's Brick Kiln Industry: *Broadening the Wall of Caste and Gender Difference*

Mahima Mishra

Abstract: *According to the 2011 census, about 85 percent of India's working population works in the unorganised sector. The vast bulk of the entire workforce is employed in the unorganised sector, where they face challenges such as poor working conditions, rigid scheduling, salary disparities, an unprotected workplace, and so on. The brick industry, known as the Brick Kilns industry, is a sector that is primarily limited to semi-urban and rural regions. Brick kilns in India are one of the world's largest industries. This industry employs over 100,000 people (Kumari, 2021). The bulk of brick kiln workers are from dismissed castes and lack equal social position, education, and security. Women experience prejudice and subjugation due to their gender and convergent identities, which include being stigmatised, economically challenged, and educationally deprived. The condition of the brick kiln workforce is also linked to other variables such as labour proletarianization (Kumari, 2021). In light of the present dynamic in brick kilns, this paper will analyse the gender and caste disparity that exists in brick industries, citing various examples from case studies across the country. It will also highlight the practice of child labour in the industry and how despite pre-existing labour laws, the living standard of the workforce does not seem to improve rather it degrades with time.*

Keywords: unorganised sector, Brick Kilns industry, caste disparity, gender discrimination, child labour

1. Background

In India, clay fired bricks are the predominant walling material. Since the Indus Valley civilization, India has had a long and rich history of producing and using clay fired bricks (2500-1500 BC). Some notable examples of clay fired brick use include historical monuments at Sarnath (3rd century BC - 11th century AD), Nalanda (4th -12th century AD), and Qutub Minar (12th -13th century AD). Brick making was popular throughout the Mughal period as well. The introduction of Europeans in India had an impact on Indian brick production. In the 18th century, German missionaries established state-of-the-art clay roofing tile manufacturing facilities on the Malabar coast, which included mechanised clay preparation and extrusion machines for shape, as well as a Hoffmann kiln for firing tiles and bricks. Bricks of huge sizes were introduced by the British. They also built enormous clay brick manufacturing operations near major cities. In 1881, one of the greatest factories was created in Akra, near Kolkata, to produce 20-30 million bricks per year. In 1873, the British also established a continuous brick firing method known as Bull's trench Kiln. The recent past of brick manufacture in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of technological and company management stagnation. The current socioeconomic conditions in the Indian brick business can be compared to those that prevailed in England and most of Europe from 1850 to 1900 (Maithel, Pg: 4).

1.1 Demand for bricks in India

Since 2001, the Indian economy has grown at an annual rate of 5-8% on average. India's urbanisation rate has also been high, with a decadal growth rate of 31.8% between 2001 and 2011. The expansion of demography and population, combined with urbanisation, has led to an increase in demand for commercial, industrial, and public structures, among other things. According to studies, around 70% of the entire created area in

India in 2030 would have been built between 2010 and 2030. Building in the country is expected to rise at a 6.6% annual rate between 2005 and 2030 (Maithel, Pg:5). During this time, the building stock is predicted to double five times, resulting in a steady rise in the demand for construction products. The statistics clearly indicate the demand for bricks along with other construction materials is on the rise and will remain so for decades to come.

2. Prevailing scenario in the industry

There are as many as 50,000 brick kilns in India. The brick kiln business employs a substantial number of women and children. Brick kilns are found on the fringes of cities in small-scale manufacturing units (Gupta, Pg:3282). The seasonal job captivates migrant labourers from nearby countrified areas, constituting a substantial portion of the interstate and inter-district migratory labour force. Owing to the sector's informality, there is no specific data on the overall number of kilns or the number of labourers in the business. Over 65% of cumulative brick output is recovered from North India's Gangetic plains. The principle brick manufacturing states in this region are Punjab, Haryana, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Maithel, Pg:7)

There are approximately 10,000 large sized brick kilns (producing on an average 45,000 bricks per day) in Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh), Faridabad (Haryana), districts near Delhi, and in Delhi proper as indicated by a National Labour Institute survey conducted in 1981-82. However, according to a statement issued by the All India Brick and Tiles Manufacturers Federation in New Delhi, there appear to be 22,000 brick kilns (Ghaziabad, Faridabad, and Delhi combined) in operation with a workforce of around 30 lacs (Gupta, Pg:3282).

Workers in brick kilns are among the poorest and most vulnerable members of the rural community. They are primarily agricultural labourers or small-scale and marginal farmers who, due to the non perennial nature of the agricultural sector, travel from state to state in pursuit of jobs in the informal urban sector. Being the second- largest sector after construction, it absorbs a mobile labour force and a capital surplus off the land. These employees are largely periodic migrants.

Brick kilns are a popular destination for interior migration in India, with production beginning around October and continuing until the pre-monsoon period the following year. On accepting advance wages from agents, the underprivileged workers are then tied to a particular brick kiln (bonded labour). If somebody violates the bond, he or she must repay the amount with double interest, while the owner shall notify other kilns to not engage with these workers in future. For about seven months, the kilns provide work for migrant labourers. Migrants see work and housing at the kilns during the production season as preferable to root-cause unemployment and underemployment. The labourers are assigned to a specific kiln for a production season, and then they are rotated between kilns, with the chance of returning to the original kiln.

Brick workers today confront concerns such as salary disparities, caste hierarchies, lax labour regulations, women's issues, discrimination reprimand, and bad working conditions, among others. Abuse, coercion, sexual misconduct, beatings, and assaults on female employees are also widespread in the brick sector. Depending on the location of origin and caste, whether local or migrant, the workers are treated differently.

3. Gender disparity in brick kiln industry

Millions of female employees are employed in manual brick-making facilities, with only a few male support staff (Mukhopadhyay, 2008). Women being a part of the hierarchical system, whether under the direction of the owner of the enterprise, their husbands, or both, are always commercialised. Furthermore, globalisation has resulted in the feminization of labour. Allotment of work in brick kilns clearly delineates and demonstrates sex-disparity with respect to work. A notable study found that men take up the skilled part of jobs in the industry while women take up the unskilled parts. Therefore, women are paid less in comparison to their male counterparts. Female workers are divided into two groups: brick moulders, who only collect mud to mould bricks and set them out in the sun to dry, and brick carriers, who transport sun-dried and burnt bricks to and from the kiln. Each group's work is not interchangeable (Sahu and Sett, 2010).

A survey conducted in West Bengal on women in the brick kiln industry concluded that moulders are generally married women who labour quickly to complete domestic tasks. The carriers, on the other hand, are extremely young and unmarried, so they do not bear as much of the load of domestic responsibilities. The brick carriers are charged per

thousand bricks transported, which is known as a furan. So, in order to earn more, they haul a greater number of bricks till they are exhausted. Female workers are not only constantly exposed to the sun, but also to an additional quantity of heat exchanged via radiation and convection both within and outside the brick kiln.

Another aspect in the life of female workers that often goes unnoticed is clothing. The recent International Standardization System (ISO) relies not only on the employees' thermal conditions and metabolic heat production as a result of employment, but also on the thermal qualities of clothes. Married female workers wear traditional Indian clothes (the sari) in both the winter and summer seasons, whereas adolescent or unmarried women dress in skirts and blouses. Since the fabric of these dresses is synthetic rather than cotton, it may contribute to the heat stress of female workers during the summer months. The continuous exposure to heat, causing physical strain to female workers often leads them to employ a coping strategy of reducing their walking speed which in turn results in them losing a part of their earnings. The lost productivity for every degree rise in temperature is about 2% in the brickfields. This reduction is exacerbated by climate change and further undermines the quality of life of female brickfield workers (Sett and Sahu, 2014)

Furthermore, female workers suffer from unique stress-related diseases as a result of workplace prejudice and a double workload (household and workplace pressure). For instance, male workers return home to recuperate after working in the field, while female workers must also manage their kids and cook food for their families. Again, the men are given extra food than the females. Women frequently cut back on their diet to provide for the men in the house, resulting in females not receiving even one proper meal per day (working or non-working). As a result, males have a greater ability to labour and provide their maximum efficient output than females.

Even though viewed as separate workers, women brick kiln workers are recognized as familial workers. Personal earning or pay is merely an idea for them. Men are viewed as primary employees due to their societal role as sole earning members or breadwinners, whereas women hold the impression of a supplemental earner. They serve as the labour reserve army. In this professional arena, they have little sway. Being in this vulnerable position, integrated with a slavish devotion to stereotypical norms in social lives, further stigmatises and deprives women from having a say, an opinion or even raising a voice for themselves.

3.1 Caste discrimination in the industry

Caste based hiring is an extremely prevalent practice in the brick kilns. Furthermore, information on brick kiln workers in India by socioeconomic category and distance is provided by the National Sample Survey Report on Employment and Migration (2007-2008) provided. Scheduled tribes are involved in 13% of inter-district, and 8% of interstate transactions, 78% of intra-district. Scheduled castes employ

around 24% of the inter-district, 34% of the intra-district and 41% of the interstate district populations. According to the survey, 22% of the interstate, 61% of the intra-district population and 16% of the inter-district population workforce are employed in India. As a result, this business is dominated by migrants and people of mixed race (Nanjunda, Pg: 86).

The bulk of workers here are poor, and do not have sufficient income to maintain their families, from excluded and underprivileged castes. The higher caste labourers are exempted from the practice of bonded labour to a great extent as compared to the lower caste workers. A study in Kerala found that due to lack of unions or organisations existing to safeguard their welfare and interests, workers are browbeaten. It has been observed that workers of the same caste as the contractor or proprietor receive preferential treatment. They are exempted of some arduous responsibilities, as well as given extended leisure hours. The SC/STs cook their meal in separate places in the kiln. Labourers from higher castes are appointed as monitors to oversee the work in kilns.

3.2 Child Labour

There are 10.1 million child labourers in India, with 5.6 million boys and 4.5 million girls, as recorded in the 2011 census data (Sharma, 2022). Furthermore, the epidemic has exacerbated the condition of child labour in India and around the world. Research in the hamlet of Rajasthan showed that young children assisting the family in brick enterprises is regarded as a 'standard'. These children are in charge of providing mud from mounds to the brick-making labourers on a regular basis. Since this work does not require much talent, it is preferred by brick kiln owners to allot these activities to children, not realising that it is significantly more labour intensive than the work done by adults. The wage earned by children is added to the parent's daily wages (Sharma, 2022). Clearly, children indulge in brick industries to augment family income. The combination of hard work and poor food quality has a detrimental impact on the physical development of these children. What children eat in the brick kilns is far from nutritious.

A study conducted in the city of Moradabad noted that low educational standards are attributed to the families' poor economic situation to which the children belong, social attitudes discourage children from attending school, and the necessity to join the labour force to meet their basic survival needs further acts as a catalyst. Due to poverty and employment, children drop out of schools. The lack of schools for underprivileged kids in the vicinity of the brick kilns exacerbates the situation. Even if those that are offered are out of reach for children. Parents cannot afford to take their children to school because they will have to carry the burden of paying tuition, purchasing uniforms and books required for school-age children. Such situations prevail despite the fact that the right to education is a fundamental right (Jafar, 2018).

4. Labour Laws and Brick Kiln workers

The State has put forth several social security acts and systems that focus predominantly on the organised sector in India, which in turn only constitutes approximately 10% of the total workforce in India. Although some of the acts provide the workers with the much needed social security and protection from exploitation, for instance, The Industrial Act of 1951, Bonded Labour Act of 1976, Minimum Wage Act of 1948, Interstate Migrant workers Act of 1979, chances are, most workers are unaware of these provisions and therefore, taking action against exploitation is only a far-fetching idea for them.

The Brick Kiln Regulation Act of 2010 that talks about grounds on which a brick kiln should be established fails to encapsulate provisions for workers' safety or security within the industry. The kiln owners do not follow laws and operate firmly. Employers also show little concern about the Minimum Wages Act. Another aspect to mention is that the difference between safe and unsafe activity is ambiguous when it comes to the brick business. Workers are sometimes sacked from their jobs for ridiculous reasons without being compensated or following any rules. Furthermore, no legislation exists to examine and safeguard concealed child labour violations in the brick business, despite the enormity of the Child Labour Act in India and on the global front. The law states little about kids who toil in the brick industry alongside their parents. Owners are required by the Labour Act to give workers healthcare facilities, crunch facilities, relaxation hours, and so on, but this is not operating on the ground level. Kilns do not have a minimum working hour regime. Workers claim that these laws give several loopholes for employers to avoid penalties.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

The Indian brick sector is based on ancient technologies, and workers in brick kilns are among the most disadvantaged and excluded groups in the workforce. The social and economic situations of the labourers are highly poor, underprivileged and vulnerable. This report reaffirmed the existence of the interlink between gender, caste and the brick business. Most workers from disadvantaged castes, who have less negotiating power, are subjugated by owners, demonstrating the caste-market economy nexus in hamlet areas, resulting in particular exclusion from the labour market. Gender and caste play an important impact in employment, salaries, and job assignments, among other things. Assuming she is a weak agency, women's labour is being devalued.

Better living conditions and escalation in wage rates is the key concern for brick kiln workers. Working at the brick industries is the labourers' last resort in the face of hardships and unemployment, as depicted by their indifference in understanding better methods of work or any type of training in the same industry. Studies point out that workers opine if they could find a job in the community, they would not opt to work in the kilns.

After examining the issues, one can conclude that the brick industry is one such arena where stronger laws and policies are required so as to provide a better and secure environment for the workers irrespective of gender or caste. Some recommendations that might refine the living standard of kiln labourers are mentioned below:

- 1) The Interstate Migration Act should be scrupulously adhered to, and all kilns should officially be registered with the regional administration.
- 2) Workers-friendly technology might soon become commonplace in order to lessen health risks.
- 3) Female labourers must be taught skills like poultry farming, dairy farming and horticulture, to supplement their earnings during the off-season. They may also work as maid servants or governesses in their native lands, which is an alternate yet viable source of income for them and does not need them to be migrants. Even if they are made to work in the industry, there should be specific guidelines under which women can be employed accompanied by health benefits and leaves and they should be provided with personal protection devices (PPDs) that can facilitate working at the site.
- 4) Priority should also be made to enhancing workers' children's education (crunch and day boarding) and health care .
- 5) Health services, such as doctors on call, ANM, ASHA Anganwadi and so on, must be available at the sites;
- 6) The need to establish toll-free contact centres, local helplines, and other services for migrant workers is imperative;
- 7) The State should establish a mission at national level including the brick kilns, such as including a gazette on workers' health and safety in the Brick Kiln Regulation Act.
- 8) Modernising and recognising the kilns as a significant rural industry, which may result in the formation of labour unions in the sector, may also aid in the reduction of bias against labourers. The proprietors could make considerable investments to automate the moulding process, if the kilns were acknowledged as industries.

References

- [1] Gulati Leela, '*Female Labour in the Unorganised Sector: Profile of a Brick Worker*', 1979 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4367527>
- [2] Jafar Mohd, '*Child Labour in Brick Kiln Industry: A Case Study of Moradabad*', 2018 https://www.academia.edu/36475787/Child_Labour_in_Brick_Kiln_Industry_A_Case_Study_of_Moradabad
- [3] Kumari Ritu, '*Brick Kiln Labourers: Women Are Underpaid And Lack Decisive Power Or Status*', 2021 <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/11/03/brick-kiln-labourers-women-are-underpaid-and-lack-decisive-power-or-status/>
- [4] Maithel Sameer, '*Evaluating Energy Conservation Potential of Brick Production in India*', 2013 <https://www.saarcenergy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/India-Report-on-Brick.pdf>

- [5] Mukhopadhyay P. '*Risk factors in manual brick manufacturing in India*.' HFESA J Ergon Aus. 2008
- [6] Nanjunda D. C. and Pulamaghatta N Venugopal, '*Hard and Invisible Bricks in the Wall: An Empirical Investigation on Gender, Caste, and Health Among Migrant Brick Workers in South India*, *Journal of the Anthropological Survey of India*', 2022
- [7] Gupta Jayoti, '*Informal Labour in Brick Kilns: Need for Regulation*', 2003
- [8] Sahu S, Sett M. '*Ergonomic evaluation of the tasks performed by the female workers in the unorganised sectors of the manual brick manufacturing units in India*.' Ergon SA. 2010
- [9] Sahu S, Sett M. '*Effects of occupational heat exposure on female brick workers in West Bengal, India*', <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/gha.v7.21923>
- [10] Sharma Madhav. '*10-12 hours of hard labour a day to earn Rs 100: Child labour thrives in the brick kilns of Rajasthan*.' 2022
- [11] <https://en.gaonconnection.com/child-labour-brick-kilns-rajasthan-bihar-uttar-pradesh-debt-malnutrition-poverty-health-exploitation-india-bhilwara/>