

Bonded by Bricks: The Exploitation of Migrant Labor in India

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Abstract: This study explores the exploitation of seasonal tribal migrant labourers in India's brick kiln industry, focusing on the structural, legal, and socio-economic factors that perpetuate bonded labour. Migrants, excluded from welfare schemes and legal protections due to spatial dislocation and bureaucratic neglect, endure appalling work and living conditions. Their children often participate in hazardous labour, deprived of education and safety. The research further examines how invisible economies of care, which sustain the labour force at both source and destination, are critical however overlooked. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study aims to reveal the role of debt-based recruitment, inadequate legal enforcement, and the failure of state machinery in perpetuating this modern slavery. It advocates a shift toward spatially networked resistance and rethinking labour rights through care economies to ensure dignity, recognition, and equitable compensation for migrant workers and their families.

Keywords: Migrant labor, Bonded labor, Brick kilns, Economies of care

Introduction

A large chunk of the workforce that migrates from remote villages in search of employment ends up as labor in brick kilns due to poverty, drought, malnutrition, starvation, anaemia, caste, and other socio-economic issues. According to a study conducted by Prayas Centre for Labour Research and Action in Udaipur, there are around 50,000 brick kilns, each employing an average of 100 families. Brick moulding is a significant activity in brick kilns. However, prior to moulding, the clay must be fetched. Whereas many brick kilns dig out clay from their immediate

surroundings, others get it from far-off fields. Many now use machines to dig and mix the clay with water. The mixed clay is taken out in hand carts to the brick-making area, where the workers mix it thoroughly once more and mould it into bricks. Children are heavily involved in this area, making it a form of child labour. The moulded bricks are then left to dry in the sun.

The next step is to put the stacked bricks in the furnace. The furnace is prepared with sawdust, and coal is burnt. Once the furnace is lit, it stops only when the entire baking process is over. The furnace uses coal as fuel, and to bake one round of bricks, 12 truckloads of coal are required. Once the bricks are baked, the nikasi begins. They take the bricks out of the furnace and stack them, ready for sale and use. Men, women, and children all work as loaders, transporting bricks to the trucks as buyers come and make their purchases (Tripathy, 1989, 2023).

Exploitation and Bondage in India's Brick Kiln Industry

The inhuman condition of brick kiln workers in India is a reality that cannot be ignored. These workers are among the most vulnerable in the Rayagada district. The exploitation faced by the migrant workforce is enormous, as they accept money in advance and then work in a bondage-like situation through the season, only to repay the advance (Tripathy, 1989). However, they end up getting more in debt. Middlemen, recruiters, and employers subject them to exploitative labor conditions. Without any social support, they face severe physical, social, and economic hardships. The workers are required to work 12 to 14 hours a day, which is a clear violation of their fundamental human rights.

The living and health conditions of brick kiln workers are equally deplorable. A typical brick kiln has tiny hutments made of unbaked bricks and tin or plastic sheet roofs. The entrance is very low, and in many huts, one must crawl in. The hutments lack any living facilities, and an entire family, usually four in number, stays together, as though stacked, for a period of six months. This kind of living arrangement is unacceptable and constitutes a direct violation of their right to a dignified existence.

A recent report and documentary have exposed the “appalling” extent of slavery within India's brick kiln industry. The study identifies the payment system as the root cause of the problem, entrapping seasonal tribal migrant workers in bonded labour for years on end (Slavery in India's Brick Kilns & the Payment System, Anti-Slavery International Volunteers for Social Justice, September 2017). The report surveyed workers and brick kilns throughout Punjab and found that recruitment

and payment systems reinforce this cycle of slavery. Shockingly, the report found that 96% of brick kiln moulders had taken out loans, and their wages were withheld for an entire season lasting eight to ten months, while working an average of 14 hours a day during the summer months. Moreover, during the summer months, 65% to 80% of children under the age of fourteen work for an average of nine hours a day. The practices detailed in the report are estimated to affect around 23 million workers in at least 100,000 functioning brick kilns across India.

The report suggests that the recruitment and payment systems are the heart of the exploitation practices: workers are provided with a loan before they start work, immediately go into debt, and then are trapped in the kiln, forced to work for an entire season without being paid.

Brick kiln workers are regularly cheated out of promised wages as no records are kept, and at the end of the season, the brick kiln owner often decides to pay less. The payment system encourages child labour, and families get their children to help them make more bricks to earn at least the minimum wage. The working and living conditions are also dire: nearly 90% of the kilns lack access to running water, and the sites are filled with dust and other chemicals. On average, entire families live in cramped rooms of 7.6 square meters. The report argues that bonded labour is illegal under Indian law, and that the Government of India has taken some steps to address the issue. Still, these measures are insufficient, and the law is often not enforced by corrupt or under-resourced officials.

The Constitution of India guarantees a free and dignified existence to all its citizens and prohibits bonded labour under Articles 21, 23(1), and 24. Bonded labor has been illegal in India since the adoption of the Bonded Labor System Abolition (BLSA) Act in 1976. The Act requires the identification, rescue, and rehabilitation of bonded labour. However, even those rescued are seen to relapse into bondage. Experts point to various reasons for the continued prevalence of bondage, including inadequate rehabilitation schemes, a dearth of local employment opportunities, a lack of skills for alternate employment, and others.

No proper census has been conducted in brick kilns, and, therefore, there are no reliable statistics available on the number of workers employed. There is no mechanism to monitor kilns, such as whether they are registered, hold a license, or are in violation of pollution norms. Except for a few labour inspectors randomly checking kilns, there is no full-fledged, systematic monitoring of labour laws in the country. The central government, state governments, local bodies, and other

entities responsible for addressing brick kiln dadan labour/bonded labour have failed miserably. Even civil society actors, who play an essential role in this fight, have much to be desired.

The situation may change when we have a determined central machinery, active labour and revenue departments, honest officials, an unfailing judiciary, strong interventions and support from the ILO, conscientious civil society organizations, a vigilant public, and aware workers. Giving victims a voice and the opportunity to be heard is also crucial. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act could have addressed unemployment if it had been implemented effectively. However, there are problems with payment failures and delays, year-round employment for only one family member, corruption, and poor administration. The implementation of this act requires urgent attention to improve the condition of brick kiln workers. Labour contractors give considerable advances to labourers, and thereafter, exploit them by forcing them to work in brick kilns in appalling conditions and causing physical harm to them.

The following illustrations are from a survey conducted among 80 brick kiln workers from the KBK region of Odisha, India, who migrate to various destinations in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. The survey aims to document their socio-economic conditions, migration patterns, working conditions, and vulnerabilities, and to highlight the systemic challenges they face in brick kilns. The data underlines the urgent need for policy interventions to address exploitation, improve access to social security, and enforce the Inter-State Migrant Workers (ISMW) Act, 1979. The tables below provide a detailed analysis of the workers' demographics, migration destinations, employment conditions, and challenges.

Poverty, Distress Migration

In India, a perplexing paradox prevails as approximately 26 per cent of the population continues to live in poverty despite the country recording consistent food surpluses in recent decades. This stark coexistence of hunger and abundance underscores the complex dimensions of human security that extend well beyond mere subsistence. India's position in the 2022 Global Hunger Index, ranking 107th among 121 nations with calculable scores, amplifies this contradiction and reflects deeper structural shortcomings. The ranking becomes even more troubling when compared with regional neighbours, as crisis-ridden Sri Lanka stands at 64th,

Nepal at 81st, Bangladesh at 84th, and Pakistan at 99th, while only Afghanistan slightly trails India at 109th (Patnaik, 2023). The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2016–18, the nation's first extensive assessment of child and adolescent nutrition, further exposed distressing levels of malnutrition. It reported that 35 per cent of children under five experienced stunting, 22 per cent of school-age children were similarly affected, and 24 per cent of adolescents were underweight for their age. These statistics mirror a convergence of socio-economic challenges ranging from rising farmer suicides to corporate penetration in the retail sector and the unchecked expansion of Special Economic Zones. Although governments have invested heavily in rural infrastructure and enacted numerous anti-poverty laws, widespread corruption and mismanagement, as captured starkly by the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2022 (1), have led to the leakage and diversion of critical funds. These governance failures also stem from the limited awareness among civil society organisations about existing schemes and interventions, resulting in highly uneven benefit distribution between urban and rural populations. The persistent disparities in access to basic amenities such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and markets further widen the developmental imbalance between rural and urban India. These disparities are compounded by the underutilization of existing welfare provisions by civil society organisations, which inadvertently contributes to the marginalisation of the most vulnerable groups. As a result, a disproportionate share of public benefits tends to flow toward relatively affluent populations rather than those facing acute deprivation, reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion (Kundu et al., G. 2020; Tripathy, 2006, 2023). The concept of livelihoods and livelihood analysis, introduced in the mid-1990s, provides a holistic framework for understanding these entrenched inequities and identifying pathways for poverty reduction. A thorough understanding of livelihood systems, which integrate physical, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, is essential for designing effective interventions that align with the realities of poor households. These systems transcend material assets by incorporating the psychological and social experiences that shape survival strategies among marginalized communities. Across rural India, households pursue diverse livelihood options, from agriculture and wage labour to seasonal migration, in their quest for income, food, and stability. This continuous struggle requires balancing immediate food consumption needs with longer-term livelihood security that sustains income-generating capacities. However, vulnerabilities within India's food and livelihood systems have intensified

distress-driven migration, prominently visible in regions such as Kalahandi and Bolangir in Odisha, where recurrent droughts push thousands toward urban centres. Central to the livelihood approach is an emphasis on household assets, institutional structures, governance processes, and responses to risks, which collectively shape the coping mechanisms of people with low incomes (Tripathy, 1989, 2015).

Exploitation, Migration, and Bondage in India's Brick Kiln Sector

Agricultural activities and allied sectors have traditionally supported about 60 per cent of rural India; however, land-based livelihoods are increasingly untenable for small and marginal farmers whose fragmented holdings cannot ensure sustenance. In this context of chronic livelihood instability, thousands of labourers from the KBK region of Odisha migrate seasonally or annually to brick kilns in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. This migration, often undertaken with entire families, is driven by limited local opportunities and compounded by exploitative practices of moneylenders who entrap vulnerable households in spirals of debt. Recognizing these harsh realities, the Government of Odisha has initiated coordination with Andhra Pradesh, supported by the Ministry of Labour and the ILO, to strengthen the rights and welfare of inter-state migrant brick kiln workers. The proposed mechanism aims to enhance their access to social security, income-support schemes, and institutional safeguards, thereby reducing dependence on predatory lenders and abusive employers. Despite such initiatives, brick kilns remain fortified spaces where labourers are subjected to coercion, surveillance, and violence designed to crush dissent and restrict mobility. What were once sites of livelihood have increasingly become spaces of bondage that undermine the basic tenets of a free labour market. Most of these labourers belong to Scheduled Tribes hailing from remote, economically neglected regions, making them even more susceptible to exploitation. Within the kiln compounds, they endure gruelling sixteen-hour workdays, meagre wages, subhuman living conditions, and perpetual indebtedness that bind them to employers' season after season. Physical exhaustion becomes a daily affliction, worsened by inadequate food, poor sanitation, and lack of rest. Alongside physical suffering, psychological distress manifests in the form of addiction and substance dependence, exacerbating their vulnerability. Though the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act provides a legal framework to safeguard their rights, lack of awareness and weak enforcement render its protective measures largely ineffectual. The cycle of debt deepens each year as advances taken for

survival become impossible to repay, compelling workers to continue labouring under oppressive conditions. Even during lean months, employers rarely offer relief, pushing households into further loans that perpetuate the cycle of bondage. Beneath the surface of India's brick kiln industry lies a system that mirrors medieval serfdom and erodes the foundations of social justice and human development (Tripathy, 1989, 2005, 2006, 2023). The labourers, reduced to invisible figures in remote industrial landscapes, symbolize the urgency of reimagining policies, institutions, and governance frameworks. True progress demands dismantling the exploitative structures that shackle these workers and forging pathways to equitable and dignified livelihoods for all.

Objectives

1. To analyze how legal, social, and economic structures facilitate the exploitation of tribal seasonal migrant workers in the brick kiln industry.
2. To examine the role of invisible economies of care at both destination and source regions, and how their recognition can reshape labor rights, welfare access, and resistance strategies for migrant communities.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with migrant families, and case studies of selected brick kilns. Quantitative data on health, wages, and access to entitlements have been collected through surveys. Policy analysis and secondary literature have complemented field findings to examine the structural drivers of bonded labour and the scope for legal and social reform.

Dignity, Wages, and Rights for Migrant Brick Workers

The issue of migrant exploitation is a complex and multifaceted problem that various scholars have highlighted over the years. Seasonal migrants are especially vulnerable, as they are often not eligible for fundamental citizenship rights or welfare benefits. This was noted by several authors, including Abbas (2016), Mander et al. (2019), and Mander & Saghal (2010), who argued that these migrants cannot access essential food items such as rice, dal, and kerosene, which the state's Public Distribution System subsidizes. Moreover, they often face difficulties accessing hospitals and

schools, and their children are sometimes forced to work alongside their parents in precarious and unsafe conditions. The language barrier also presents a significant challenge as migrants are unable to make demands and are therefore kept highly alienated from the wider society. This is especially evident in places like Kerala, where Jharkhandi Adivasis do not speak Malayalam, and in Tamil Nadu, where eastern Indian migrants cannot converse in Tamil. Furthermore, these migrants are unable to vote in elections unless they return to their home regions, and they are often treated as second-class citizens by the authorities, if they are recognized as citizens at all.

A second domain of exploitation that affects migrant workers is related to the domestic economies of care that sustain the entire system of migrant exploitation. Although some studies on seasonal migration in India have explored the links between migrants' work and their home regions, such as Breman (2007), Mosse et al. (2005), Pattenden (2016, 2018), Picherit (2012, 2018a), Rogaly (2003), Rogaly & Rafique (2003), and Rogaly & Thieme (2012), few have analyzed the relationship between production and the invisible economies of care that are at the heart of the appropriation of value from labor.

One possible solution would be to adopt a partial "wages for housework" approach, whereby the migrant's wage includes the cost of running the workers' household (including men and women, children, and elders) all year round, or the household is additionally and directly remunerated. Besides, social security not only for the migrants but also for those staying back in the villages could be another demand. By recognizing the importance of economies of care in migrant workers' lives, it is possible to raise demands that can help alleviate the exploitation they face.

The present and only law, the Interstate Migrant Workman Act, 1979, formulated with particular attention to western Orissa, applies only to people who cross state boundaries. Movements within the state do not fall within its purview. Its emphasis is on regulation of movement, not on welfare and security. The license to move, paid for by the sardars and obtained without risk of inquiry, costs Rs 100 per worker. In effect, the migrants are punished by the conditions of work, lack of insurance, and deprivation of benefits for their desperate search for food.

The lack of state machinery to follow up on names and addresses makes it almost impossible to enforce the law in favour of individuals, even if a worker can report them. This skewed law goes against the fundamental right of the Indian citizen to move freely. For a law protecting displaced labourers, within and outside

the state, the state must first acknowledge that these are human beings. Some things are changing due to the persistent efforts of social workers and NGOs, who feel that the media has been a great help in raising awareness. The state government has finally acknowledged the problem and begun registering migrants, though the number may seem minor. Nevertheless, it will be more difficult now to torture or dispose of their dead bodies. Social workers continue to strive for happier circumstances, so that people are not forced to live miserably away from home. The state's food-for-work program is still poorly timed, beginning only after fieldwork has started, which is useless for communities with no savings. Work on government projects in the hard months is never enough, but social workers are still trying.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Brick Kiln Workers

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
18-25	Male	20	25.0
18-25	Female	10	12.5
26-35	Male	25	31.3
26-35	Female	15	18.8
36-50	Male	8	10.0
36-50	Female	2	2.5
Total		80	100.0

Table 2: Destination Points of Migrant Workers

<i>Destination State</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Andhra Pradesh	35	43.8
Tamil Nadu	20	25.0
Karnataka	15	18.8
Kerala	10	12.5
Total	80	100.0

Table 3: Employment Duration at Brick Kilns

<i>Duration (Months)</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
3-6	15	18.8
6-9	40	50.0
9-12	25	31.3
Total	80	100.0

Table 4: Average Daily Working Hours

<i>Hours per Day</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
10-12	10	12.5
12-14	30	37.5
14-16	40	50.0
Total	80	100.0

Table 5: Wage Structure

<i>Daily Wage (INR)</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
200-300	25	31.3
300-400	40	50.0
400-500	15	18.8
Total	80	100.0

Table 6: Debt Burden

<i>Debt Amount (INR)</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
10,000-20,000	20	25.0
20,000-50,000	45	56.3
>50,000	15	18.8
Total	80	100.0

Table 7: Access to Social Security Schemes

<i>Access Status</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
No Access	60	75.0
Partial Access (PDS)	15	18.8
Full Access	5	6.3
Total	80	100.0

Table 8: Health and Living Conditions

<i>Condition</i>	<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Inadequate Food & Rest	65	81.3
Poor Sanitation	70	87.5
Substance Abuse Issues	30	37.5
No Medical Facilities	55	68.8
Total (Multiple Responses)	-	-

Table 9: Health Issues Among Tribal Migrant Workers in Brick Kilns

<i>Health Issue</i>	<i>Percentage Affected</i>
Respiratory Problems	19.91%
Body Ache	54.17%
Chest Pain	17.59%
Digestive Disorders	18.98%
Headaches	33.80%
Weakness	66.67%
Skin Rashes and Palm Cracks	56.48%
Eye Problems	68.52%

Source: Field study

Table 10: Access to Government Entitlements for Migrant Workers

<i>Entitlement</i>	<i>Accessibility (% of Workers)</i>	<i>Key Barrier</i>	<i>Source</i>
Public Distribution System (PDS)	10%	Lack of identity cards at destination	Draft, Abbas (2016)
Healthcare Services	15%	Non-portability of identity documents	Draft, Mander et al. (2019)
Education for Children	23%	Distance to schools (avg. 40 min walk)	Anti-Slavery International (2017)
Social Security Benefits	5%	Lack of awareness and registration	Draft, Mander & Saghal (2010)
MGNREGA Employment	20%	Poor timing and corruption	Draft, Menon (2014)

Table 11: Working Conditions in Brick Kilns

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Details</i>
Average Working Hours (Summer)	14 hours/day
Average Working Hours (Winter)	11 hours/day
Overtime Payment	None, despite 5+ hours over legal limit
Wage Discrepancy	84% paid less than promised
Minimum Wage Violation	33% paid below minimum wage for 1000 bricks
Women's Wages	Paid to male head, no formal registration

Source: Anti-Slavery International (2017)

Table 12: Living Conditions in Brick Kilns

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Details</i>	<i>Source</i>
Housing Size	Avg. 7.6 sq. meters (below 10 sq. m legal minimum)	Anti-Slavery International (2017)
Water Access	88% lack access to treated water	Anti-Slavery International (2017)
Toilet Facilities	76% lack water supply	Anti-Slavery International (2017)
Hutment Structure	Unbaked bricks, tin/plastic roofs, low entrance	Menon (2014)
Family Occupancy	Avg. 4 members per hutment	Menon (2014)

Table 13: Child Labor in Brick Kilns

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Percentage Working</i>	<i>Average Hours/Day (Summer)</i>	<i>Education Access</i>	<i>Source</i>
5–14 years	65–80%	9 hours	77% lack primary education	Anti-Slavery International (2017)
14+ years	100%	12 hours	Limited access	Anti-Slavery International (2017)

Table 14: Payment System and Debt in Brick Kilns

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Details</i>	<i>Source</i>
Loan Prevalence	96% of moulders have taken loans	Anti-Slavery International (2017)
Wage Withholding	Wages withheld for 8–10 months	Anti-Slavery International (2017)
Advance Usage	Repay debts, marriages, medical bills	Menon (2014)
Earnings per 1000 Bricks	Rs 220–350 (varies by negotiation)	Menon (2014)
Debt Outcome	Many workers end season in debt	Menon (2014), Anti-Slavery International (2017)

Systemic Exploitation and Vulnerability of Migrant Brick Kiln Workers

The combined analysis of Tables 1 to 14 presents a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic vulnerability, exploitative working conditions, and systemic deprivation of migrant brick kiln workers, particularly those from tribal communities.

Table 1 shows that the workforce is predominantly young, with the largest share (31.3%) belonging to the 26–35 age group, and overwhelmingly male. This demographic pattern indicates that migration to brick kilns is driven by the most economically active age populations who shoulder family responsibilities.

Tables 2 and 3 further contextualize this mobility: Andhra Pradesh attracts 43.8% of migrants due to geographic proximity and established recruitment chains, while most workers remain employed for 6–9 months, closely tied to the brick kiln production cycle. This seasonal circular migration emphasizes their economic compulsion and the lack of stable livelihood options in their home regions.

The intensity of work is reflected in Table 4, with half of the workers reporting daily shifts of 14–16 hours, far exceeding legal limits and suggesting forced labour-like conditions.

Table 5 corroborates this exploitation: 81.3% earn less than ₹400 per day, insufficient to meet subsistence needs even in rural India. Income deprivation is compounded by the widespread debt burden shown in Table 6, where over 75% owe more than ₹20,000. Such debt often originates from advances given by labour sardars, binding workers into exploitative contracts and limiting their ability to exit mid-season. This debt-driven coercion fits the classic definition of bonded labour under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976.

Access to welfare entitlements (Table 7) remains abysmally low. Only 6.3% of workers have full access to social security schemes, with 75% receiving none. The lack of portability of PDS, healthcare benefits, or MGNREGA wages, reinforced by the absence of identity documents at worksites (Table 10), severely restricts migrants' access to statutory welfare. This systematic exclusion not only violates constitutional rights but also deepens workers' dependence on exploitative employers.

Tables 8 and 9 highlight the alarming health consequences of these structural deprivations. Poor sanitation (87.5%), inadequate food and rest (81.3%), and lack of medical facilities (68.8%) contribute to high morbidity. Health data indicate serious occupational hazards: eye problems (68.52%), weakness (66.67%), skin disorders (56.48%), and respiratory issues stemming from constant exposure to dust, smoke, and extreme temperatures. These align with earlier findings by Menon (2014) and Anti-Slavery International (2017), confirming that brick kilns function as hazardous workplaces with minimal safety provisions. The prevalence of substance abuse (37.5%) may also be understood as a coping mechanism in an environment of chronic physical exhaustion and psychological distress.

Tables 11 and 12 deepen this understanding of exploitation. Workers face prolonged hours, up to 14 hours daily in summer, with no overtime payments and wage discrepancies for 84% of workers. A third are paid below the minimum wage, and women are systematically disenfranchised as their wages are paid to male household

heads. Living conditions violate minimum standards: average dwelling size (7.6 sq. m) is below legal requirements, clean drinking water is unavailable for 88% of households, and sanitation facilities are grossly inadequate. Such living conditions compromise health, dignity, and safety, marking an apparent failure of regulatory enforcement.

Table 13 reveals the most disturbing dimension: child labour. Between 65% and 80% of children aged 5-14 work up to 9 hours a day, while all children aged 14 and above participate in labour. The lack of education access-77% of younger children not attending school-ensures the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Brick kilns thus violate both national child protection laws and international conventions on the worst forms of child labour.

Table 14 captures the mechanisms that entrench workers in bonded labour. Almost all moulders (96%) take advances from contractors, and wages are withheld for 8–10 months, preventing workers from leaving mid-season. The wage rate per 1,000 bricks (₹220–350) is often manipulated through opaque accounting practices. Advances are used for essential needs, such as medical expenses, marriages, and debt repayment, signalling that the labour system preys upon pre-existing poverty. As both Menon (2014) and Anti-Slavery International (2017) argue, the brick kiln economy thrives on an institutionalized cycle of debt, wage manipulation, and restricted mobility, which traps workers in perpetual servitude.

The analysis across all fourteen tables paints a grim portrait of systemic exploitation marked by overwork, underpayment, indebtedness, health hazards, child labour, and denial of constitutional rights. Migration, initially pursued as a survival strategy, ultimately leads workers into a tightly controlled labour regime structured around coercion. Combined with poor living conditions, minimal government oversight, and non-portability of welfare entitlements, these factors create a situation where workers are structurally disenfranchised and remain vulnerable year after year. The evidence clearly underscores the urgent need for multi-dimensional reforms: strict enforcement of labour laws, debt regulation, portable social protection, improved worksite monitoring, and targeted interventions to eliminate child labour. Without systemic transformation, brick kilns will continue to function as one of the most exploitative sectors in India's informal economy.

Debt, Exploitation, and Systemic Deprivation in India's Brick Kilns

The advances taken by brick kiln workers are primarily used to repay previous debts, cover marriage-related expenses, purchase bullocks, pay medical bills, and

meet other essential household needs. At the kilns, the food allowance of Rs 60 per day provided to each unit remains constant irrespective of the number of family members migrating together. At the end of the season, this daily allowance, combined with the advance taken, is calculated against the number of bricks produced by the workers. A standard three-member work unit earns between Rs 300 and Rs 450 per 1,000 bricks, depending on negotiations with the kiln owner or contractor.

A group of workers can produce between 10,000 and 400,000 bricks over about 5 months, depending on the availability of physically fit family members who assist the core unit. This production range corresponds to earnings between Rs 20,000 and a rare peak of Rs 140,000 per season. However, after deducting the Rs 60 daily food allowance and the earlier advance, many workers end the gruelling kiln season with little or no income and sometimes even fall further into debt. The working conditions in brick kilns are deplorable, with workers often labouring long hours in intense heat without proper hydration, medical care, or basic sanitation. Workers endure hazardous levels of smoke emitted during the brick-burning process, as well as dust and fine particulate matter that cause respiratory and chronic health problems. They also suffer from skin ailments, joint pain, musculoskeletal disorders, and multiple other physical health issues. Children are also engaged in brick kiln labour, exposing them to severe health risks and denying them their fundamental right to education.

The social conditions prevailing in brick kilns are equally appalling, as most workers belong to the lowest rungs of society and face discrimination and systemic exclusion.

Their marginal social identity makes them vulnerable to disrespect, indignity, and verbal, physical, and economic abuse. They are deprived of fundamental human rights and are at the mercy of intermediaries, contractors, and kiln owners who frequently manipulate records and payments, leaving workers in deeper debt.

Women and children face increased risks of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in these unregulated and exploitative spaces. Despite existing laws and schemes, bonded labour continues to thrive in India, especially in the brick kiln sector. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that nearly 2.3 million people in India work in bondage, with a significant proportion employed in brick kilns. According to the ILO, poverty, illiteracy, low levels of awareness, and weak enforcement of labour legislation contribute to the persistence of bonded labour in the brick industry. In addition to specific laws against bonded labour, the

Factories Act of 1948 and the Mines Act of 1952 contain provisions for occupational safety, health, and welfare. These Acts prescribe minimum working conditions, mandate safety measures, establish welfare norms, and outline the responsibilities of inspectors and advisory bodies. However, enforcement of these Acts remains deeply flawed, as noted by several oversight agencies. A report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) highlighted deficiencies in the implementation of the Factories Act, including understaffed inspectorates, the failure to inspect many factories, and delays in the submission of reports.

Basic amenities such as toilets, drinking water, and rest areas were lacking in several inspected factories, demonstrating systemic non-compliance. The Indian Bureau of Mines (IBM) reported widespread violations of the Mines Act, including inadequate worker safety, poor sanitation, and insufficient training. Several mine-related accidents and fatalities were attributed to non-compliance with safety regulations, signalling institutional weakness in enforcement. Although multiple welfare policies exist for vulnerable populations, access to entitlements among migrant brick kiln workers remains extremely low. Limited awareness of schemes and the difficulty of accessing services at destination sites contribute to widespread exclusion.

Many migrant labourers possess identity cards issued at their source areas but fail to carry them during migration, restricting access to benefits. Public services associated with identity cards often reach the worker's relatives at the source rather than the migrants at the kiln. Government schemes rarely reach migrant workers at kilns due to documentation barriers and administrative neglect. While skilled migrants contribute to resilience and development through remittances and labour, poor and low-skilled migrants often face unsafe, irregular, and involuntary migration pathways. Tribal migrants working in brick kilns suffer multiple health problems stemming from environmental hazards and extremely strenuous labour. Raw materials used in brick manufacturing expose workers to hazardous dust particles, chemicals, and toxic emissions. Those employed in clay extraction and brick cutting suffer from chronic back and body aches, as well as persistent headaches. Survey data reveal widespread health issues among tribal migrant households, including respiratory problems (19.91%), chest pain (17.59%), digestive disorders (18.98%), and headaches (33.8%). Moreover, 66.67% report weakness, 56.48% suffer from skin rashes and cracked palms, and 68.52% face eye-related problems. These patterns demonstrate severe occupational health risks requiring urgent intervention.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Effective enforcement of existing laws, combined with worker awareness and employer accountability, is essential to address the root causes of bonded labour, poverty, and illiteracy. A robust legal framework on labour migration, with strict oversight of contractors and recruitment agents, is necessary to prevent exploitation and trafficking. Child labour in brick kilns must be prohibited entirely, and educational facilities for migrants' children must be ensured at worksites. Ensuring humane work conditions, proper sanitation, and access to medical care is central to improving workers' lives. Debt plays a central role in migration patterns, as large numbers of migrants borrow loans to finance travel and repay household debts through remittances. Many workers remain trapped in debt cycles that perpetuate vulnerability and prevent upward mobility. Tribal migrants often leave their communities due to poverty, conflict, environmental degradation, or inadequate livelihood options. In destination areas, they face discrimination, exploitation, inadequate housing, and limited access to healthcare and education. Loss of traditional lands and culture deepens their marginalization, making migration a traumatic experience. Despite these difficulties, tribal migrants demonstrate resilience, striving to rebuild their lives and integrate into new communities.

Anti-Slavery International and Volunteers for Social Justice (VSJ) work to combat bonded labour in India's brick kilns by freeing workers, advocating for compensation, and promoting workers' rights. Children constitute nearly one-third of all brick kiln workers, with 65% to 80% of those aged 5–14 engaged in hazardous work. Older children work an average of 12 hours a day in summer and 10 hours in winter, which meets international definitions of the “worst forms of child labour.” Wage violations are rampant, with nearly 84% of workers reporting payment discrepancies between the agreed and actual rates.

Women are unpaid despite working equally hard, as wages are issued solely to the male head of household, leaving women without formal recognition or benefits. Living conditions in kilns are substandard: 88% rely on polluted groundwater, and 76% lack usable toilets. Families live in cramped shelters averaging 7.6 square meters, well below the legal minimum of 10 square meters. Schools are distant and largely inaccessible, with 77% of workers reporting a lack of education for children aged 5–13.

Resolving these issues requires expanding rural development, strengthening the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (ISMW) Act, and improving interstate coordination.

The ISMW Act must be amended to include migrants moving within a state, regulate unregistered contractors, mandate crèches and mobile health units, and address the needs of female and child migrants (Tripathy 2012, 2015). Improving enforcement of minimum wages, medical benefits, protective gear, and displacement allowances is essential for safeguarding migrant workers. Empowering workers through awareness campaigns, legal aid, unionization, and improved access to financial services can significantly reduce exploitation. Ultimately, only a coordinated effort by government agencies, civil society, employers, and communities can ensure that brick kiln workers live with dignity, safety, and the constitutional rights they deserve.

Note

- [1] India is the 85 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries, according to the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International.

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