

CHAPTER 4

Chapter - 4

BARAK VALLEY: THE INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

Assam Scenario

The state of Assam with low infrastructure, geographical and topographical conditions, inadequate communication facilities etc. always leaves it far behind the rest of the country. The state had experienced the perennial problem of floods and the large bouts of immigration for a long period. Inadequate irrigation facilities, floods and traditional agricultural practices are identified as the major causes of low production and productivity in agriculture in the State (Planning and Development Department, Govt. of Assam: Draft Tenth Five Year Plan & Annual Plan: 2002-2003). The State which is always regarded as having the potential for industrial development has not been able to make much headway even in this sector. In the industrial map of the country it is abysmally low. The total number of factories in the State account for only 1.23 percent of the country's total. The total value added by the factories is only 0.9 percent of the total value added by the same sector at all India level.

As reported in the Draft Tenth Plan of the State, the incidence of poverty in the State is even higher, it is to be noted that there has been a decrease in the incidence of urban poverty in the State over time, but the incidence of rural poverty continues to be higher than all India average and has not shown any sign of improvement over time.

“The economy of Assam is basically agrarian and hence, about 93 per cent of the total labour force in the country is in the unorganised sector. Assam being the land of agriculture, about 80 per cent of the workers are engaged in the unorganised sector including agriculture. At present there are more than 69-lakhs unorganised workers working in various unorganised sectors/occupation in the state. It is also pertinent point to mention that due to lack of Industrialisation in the state a sizeable number of workers are compelled to work in the unorganised sectors with a very poor remuneration. From the available statistics and data it appears that the unorganised workers in the state are living below poverty line”. (Government of Assam, 2005)

Table 4.1 : Percentage of total workers, main workers and marginal workers to total workers by residence and sex: Assam 1991 and 2001

Total/ Rural/ Urban	Persons/ Male/ Female	Percentage to total population					
		Workers					
		Total workers		Main workers		Marginal workers	
		1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001
Rural	Persons	36.7	36.4	31.3	26.1	5.4	10.3
	Male	49.3	49.8	48.1	41.5	1.2	8.3
	Female	23.3	22.3	13.3	9.9	10.0	12.4
Urban	Persons	30.9	32.0	30.4	29.6	0.5	2.4
	Male	50.5	51.0	50.2	48.2	0.3	2.8
	Female	7.5	10.3	6.7	8.4	0.8	1.9
Total	Persons	36.1	35.9	31.2	26.6	4.9	9.3
	Male	49.4	49.9	48.4	42.3	1.1	7.6
	Female	21.6	20.8	12.6	9.7	9.0	11.1

Source: Census of India 2001. Assam provisional population totals. Paper-3 of 2001

As per Census data, the percentage of total workers to total population shows a slight decline from 36.1 in 1991 to 35.9 per cent in 2001. This trend is more significant in case of main workers, which show a decline from 31.2 percent in 1991 to 26.6 percent in 2001. The percentage of main workers has decreased among all groups except in the case of urban female. The percentage of rural female main workers decreased from 13.3 to 9.9, while that of men decreased from 48.1 to 41.5.

There has been an increase in the percentage of marginal workers among both men and women. This is true for both rural and urban areas. The percentage of rural male marginal workers increased from 1.2 to 8.3, while that of female from 10.0 to 12.4. This phenomenon is but a reflection of casualisation and informalisation of labour under

globalisation. This phenomenon has been observed at all India level as well. There is increased incidence of unemployment and continued to be higher than all India average. (NCW: 2005).

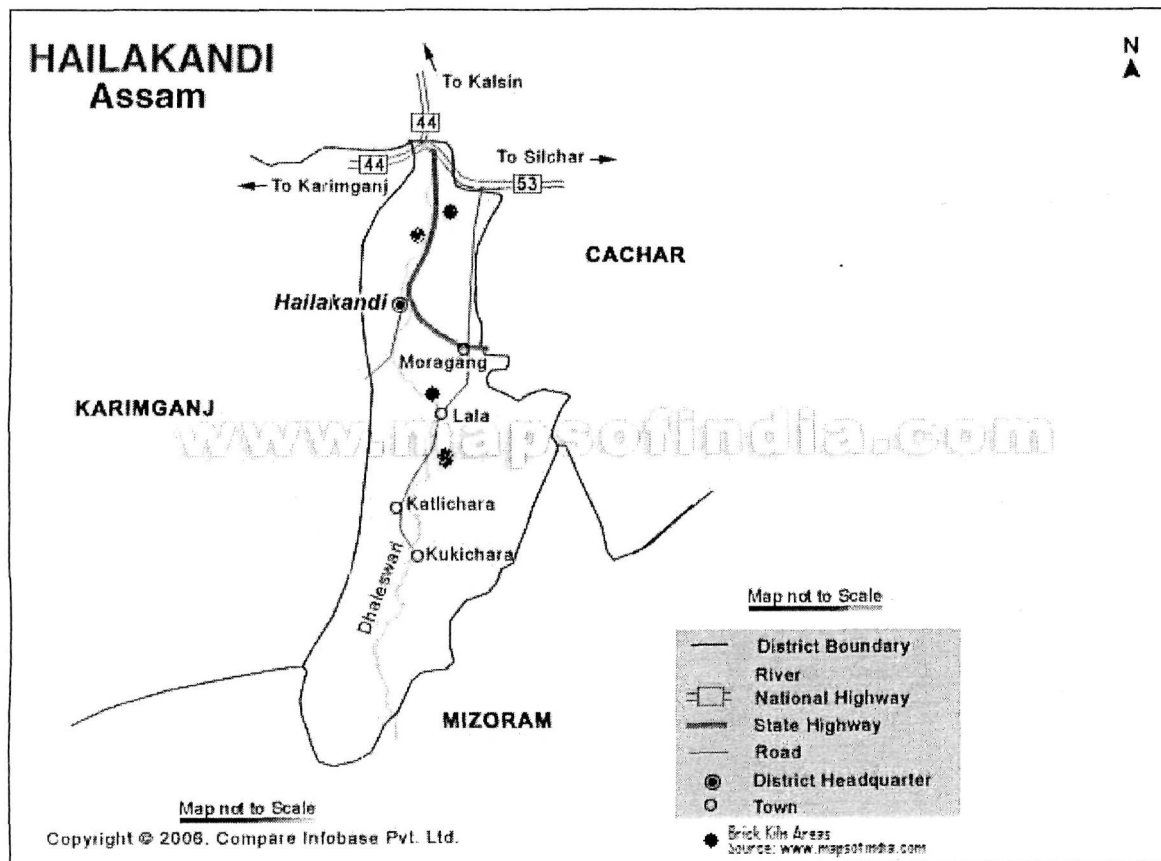
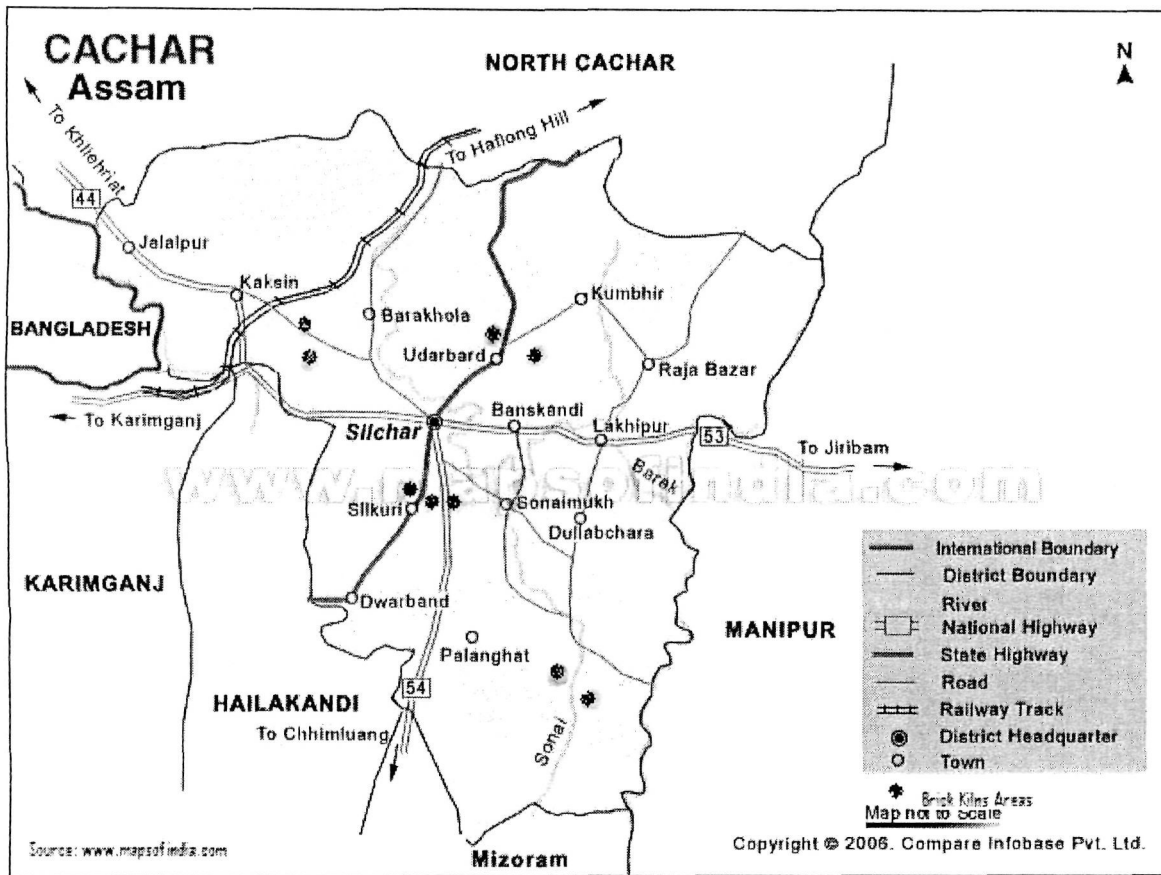
In the wake of minimal industrialisation, employment becomes a challenging task. Therefore, the vulnerability of the workers is evident with the lack of employment avenues in both organised and unorganised sector. Various points of view have been expressed regarding the role of unorganised sector in preserving the income generating potential. There is a need to ensure favourable working condition for the labourers because the paid work and unpaid work for the women has considerable implications on her health. However, given the heterogeneity of the working climate across countries and within the unorganised sector itself, no single strategy can be adopted in pursuit of the objectives. Micro studies in the unorganised sector are useful tools for recognizing the women's contribution as a survival strategy. The present study is an attempt to do the same with regards to women in brick kiln industry.

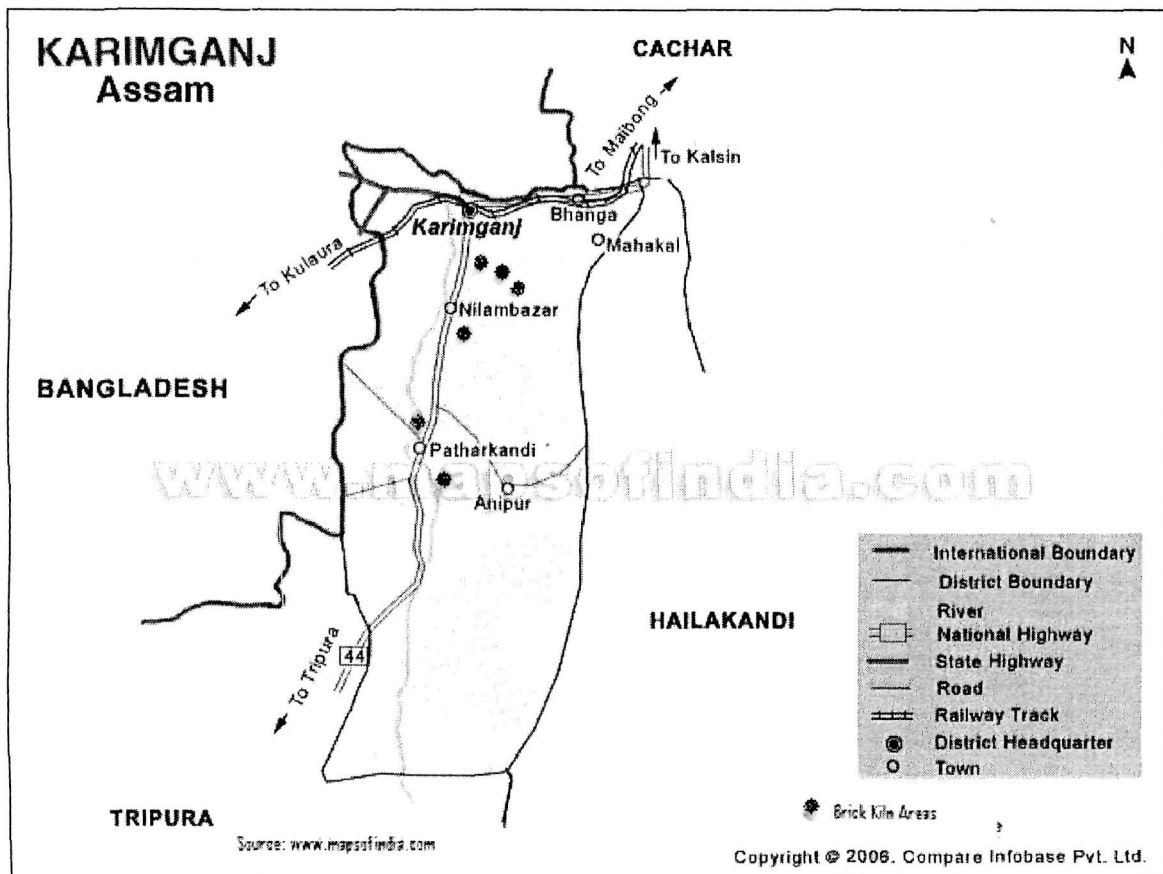
Background of the Study Area:

The Barak Valley is the southern most region of Assam located between latitude 24 8 and 25 8 North and longitude 92 15 and 93 15 East covers an extensive area of 6922 sq. kms. comprising 2313 villages and 8 towns in 4 sub-divisions of three districts (Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj) of South Assam (Government of Assam, 1997). The Barak Valley has a population of 30.19 lakhs (Government of Assam 2000). The topography of the valley is heterogeneous composed of high hills, low land called '*beel*' and '*haor*', and level plains dotted with low ranges isolated hills called '*tillas*'. The river Barak flows through the plain portion of the valley. The climate condition of the valley is characterized by high temperature and heavy rainfall. The average maximum temperature recorded 31.6 centigrade and minimum 16.1 Centigrade, rainfall varies from 19.6 mm to 561.1 mm during 1995-96. The economy of the valley had been a periphery to the economic mainstream of Bengal during the British rule. The partition of the country in the wake of independence and the consequent emergence of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) not only had shattered the traditional cheapest and quickest lines of transport and communication but also had snapped the age old channels of trade,

commerce and transactions. The post independence phase did not adequately compensate the valley for all the loss inflicted on it by partition.







As per the Expert committee on population projection in 2000 the valley got altogether 30.19 lakhs persons. The valley is characterized by thickly populated area with density of 360 persons per sq. km. and urban population comprises about 9 per cent of total population. The basic statistics of North East Region states that the valley is more populous than at least five out of seven states of North East Region viz. Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Manipur (Government of India, 2000). The literacy rate in the valley is 56.6 per cent which is higher than the national average of 52.2 per cent.

The work participation rate in the valley is agrarian based. In 1991, it has been observed that about 49 per cent of the geographical area is under agriculture and 36.9 per cent are under forest. The irrigated area as per the gross cropped area was 1.69 and fertilizer consumption per hectare of gross cropped area was 11.7 kg which were much lower than the national average of 40.22 per cent and 70.3 kg respectively. The average yield of rice per hectare in the valley was 1423 kg as against 1745 kg in the national average during 1997-98.

The number of existing industries (factories and small scale industries) in the valley constituted about 8 per cent of the total number of industries in the state of Assam during the period of 1977-2000.

With the advent of minimal industries, the availability of employment in the organized sector is difficult. Brick kilns provide a gainful employment to a significant unorganised landless labour who works in brick kiln during lean season of agriculture as a matter of their survival. There fore, the study in respect of unorganised labour in brick kiln and women in particular is likely to be extreme relevant and in a backward area.

Brick Kiln Industry in *Barak Valley*

Brick Kiln industry in Barak Valley is a major employer of unskilled and semiskilled labour. There are around 150 brick kilns are running in the three districts of Barak Valley (viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj) employing on an average 70 to 80 Workers. The process of brick production is largely requires both skilled and unskilled labour. Both male and female workers are recruited for this purpose. The work at Brick kilns is a seasonal activity occurring largely between October and May. The brick kilns shut-down during the monsoon period. The work in brick kiln industry attracts migrant labourers from surrounding rural areas and forms a large bulk of inter-state as well as intra state migratory labour force. The skilled labours are mainly from Bihar, Jharkhand and also from few districts of Assam namely Dubri and Kokrajar. Workers engaged in Brick industry belong to the lowest economic strata of the society. A majority of the workers are landless labourers. Very few are having small holdings. They resort to seasonal migration from their place of origin to place of destination as a matter of survival. There is not enough work in the village during the lean season to give them a livelihood. This is also a significant factor for their migration.

Recruitment Process

Supply of rural mass as surplus labour from rain-fed agricultural economy of drought hit and poverty stricken areas is mostly done through chain of contractors. These petty contractors provide inflow of labour capital to the industry and survive

largely on the commission based on supply of labour. The labourers for brick kiln industry are recruited through *sardars* (labour agents/contractors) which is accompanied by payment of advances to the workers for a specified period of employment. The advance is paid during *Puja* festival when they are in need of money. This is crucial time for the labourers as well as for the owners. The labourers are available who are in need of work and the owners also require huge number of labour for the running of industry. The advance money is ranging from Rs. 500 to Rs. 1500 per head. They migrate along with other family members comprising of husband, wife and children, moves to a given brick kiln and works there for the entire season i.e. from October up to the beginning of monsoon season. Only the male heads or rather only the adult males are registered as workers in the muster rolls of the employers and the rest of the vast labour force remains invisible to social production and therefore for all practical purposes to the social accounting within the economy. The women accompanying the men could be the wives, sisters or widowed mothers. The children in the family could also include younger brothers of the workers apart from the children of the workers.

The *sardar* (contractor) plays a significant role in connecting labourers with the brick kiln owners. People get information from the contractor who is from their own village about the resume of work in brick kiln industry. Some times, the owners also visit nearby villages to identify the needy labour with the help of local *sardars*. The labourers are accountable to *sardars* directly. Advance payment is a system that has developed from a certain correlation of the demand and supply side of economics of labour. The kilns operate at a time when they can get the maximum number of seasonal workers who are freed from the agriculture work. As the kilns operate only six to eight months a year, there is a great demand for labour on time to be able to optimize production. The demand factor plays an important role in determining the extent of advance the employers are ready to part with for booking the labour for the season. The labourers on the other hand being mostly agricultural labourers or marginal farmers experience a lean season once the sowing season for the main monsoon crop is over i.e. between July and September. The owner of the brick kiln industry bears one way of traveling expenses of the migrant labourers. This is around Rs.300 either paid in advance or given to them once they resume to their duty.

The advance paid to the workers is deducted from the beginning of the season, the amount of deductions depends upon the understanding between the worker and the labour agent. Some times the owner also discusses with the worker about the repayment capacity and start deductions as per the convenience of both owner and the worker. If the worker wishes to leave mid-term, he has to return the balance advance.

Table 4.2: Category of workers engaged in Brick-kilns and Terms of payment

Worker category	Nature of Job and Terms of payment
<i>Pathera</i> (Moulder)	Moulding of bricks from clay (Rs. 300/- per 1000 bricks)
Cycle Party	Carry bricks from Trench to the Kiln or from kiln to stack (per 1000 bricks) Rs. 50-60 (For less distance) Rs. 70-90 (For larger distance)
<i>Reja</i>	Carry bricks from Trench to the Kiln or from kiln to stack (per 1000 bricks) Rs. 90 (For less distance) Rs. 110 (For larger distance)
<i>Bharaiwala</i> (loader)	Arrange bricks in to the kiln for baking (Rs. 3500 per 1000 bricks)
<i>Beldar</i> (stacker)	Stack dried clay bricks (per 1000 bricks)
Fireman*	Administer the baking process (Rs. 3000/month)
<i>Coalman</i> *	Carry coal from the stack to the fireman (Rs. 2000/month)
<i>Rapaswala</i> (Rubbishman)	Arranges and dismantles the layer of soil from arranged bricks before and after they are burnt in the kiln. (per 1000 bricks)
<i>Nikasi</i>	Take out the baked bricks from the kilns and sort and stack them according to the grade of bricks (per 1000 bricks)
Driver*	Rs. 2500/ month
<i>Sardar</i> (Contractor)	A percentage of the per thousand rate and a lump sum share on per head of those who are employed on per month basis (the workers only)
<i>Munim/manager</i> (Accountant)*	Maintain record of production, expenses, deductions, in charge of paying wages and giving advances.
Waterman*	Supply pump water from the source to the moulders
<i>Chowkidar</i> (Guard)*	Guard the stack

* Employed on payment per month

The structure of brick kiln industry is pyramidal in nature and composed of four levels. The top of the pyramid is occupied by the owners, and on the second level there are the managers (accountants). On the third level, there are the brokers, who have a special function in this industry. Finally, at the bottom of the pyramid, there are workers composed of five main groups (moulders, loaders, un-loaders, wooden cart drivers and firemen). This hierarchical structure exists in brick kilns of large size. However, a smaller brick kiln has to resort less to managers and to middlemen. Hence, a distinction must be made between large-sized enterprises and small-sized enterprises. Large-sized enterprises, or *chambers*, using seasonal labourers have a hierarchical organisation of work and have recourse to brokers, in contrast to small-sized enterprises, or *kalavasals*, that use permanent labour force. The volume of their production and their turnover can be understood by the size of enterpris. With the advance system, big units can provide liquidity to satisfy the financial need of their workers, as opposed to small enterprises. Therefore, large enterprises require more brokers than small ones. In Barak Valley, two districts namely Cachar and Karimganj are having fixed chimneys, requiring more workers. In case of running chimney, the production is relatively less requiring less number of labourers. In case of fixed chimney around 100 workers are needed whereas in case of running chimney, it can be managed with workers up to 50 to 60. This demand of labour has its implications over the advance payment. In much of the running chimney kilns the advance payment is not rigid. In case of small kilns the existence of brokers is less compared to the big kilns.

The contractors bring the workers from the district that they belong to and often from a radius of 15 km of where the contractor himself is located. Even though the contractor does not charge any interest on the advances made, he makes his money from the commission that is paid to him on the wage rates paid to the workers. All the 9 Brick kiln owners interviewed, mentioned that they do not pay any other payment to the contractors except a commission on the total number of bricks produced by the different category of workers. When the owner settles on the wage rate for the brick kiln workers officially, he includes the commission to be paid to the contractor from the wage – meaning that this commission comes from the labour of the workers and is already built into their wage.

The different categories of workers have different wage rates per thousand bricks and there is no interchangeability in roles at the site. The study is attempting to track down the different ways in which the contractor accrues part of the surplus value to himself. It is difficult to track this element through the system of advance and the neat calculations worked out by both the brick kiln owners and the contractor. One factor (of several others that are being worked out) that hides this extraction is the number of years that each worker has been working with the same contractor. The length of the relationship could explain the indebtedness of the worker to the contractor and a continuation of tied relationship based on interest accumulation on the advance or transactions between the contractor and the worker at the origin of their relationship. The difficulty is in differentiating the element of bondage as one that has its origin in the employment condition at the brick kiln or one that originates in the agrarian sector.

The Brick Kiln Labour Market

Bricks are produced during summer only. Consequently, this requires seasonal labourers who are recruited in the brick kilns where production is also seasonal. Due to the lack of opportunities for work in agriculture, labourers migrate through brokers to work in brick kilns. The brick kiln industry, therefore, employs seasonal workers who are very unstable and may leave. They can change their activities and supply their labour to another brick kiln. The labourers are mainly poor peasants who own no land. In order to avoid labour volatility, brokers bond them. Hence, for six to eight months, labourers work in the field and the rest of the year they work in brick kilns and in other informal activities. They leave their villages for the suburbs of big cities where bricks are produced. Brick kiln owners encounter difficulties in recruiting seasonal workers due to the seasonality of the work. Because of time and weather constraints, employers find it hard to recruit workers for the whole season. In Barak Valley of Assam, seasonal migration occurs both from inter state and inter district. This result differs from that of Gupta (2003), who finds that inter-state migration occurs in the north of India. With no other employment avenues available to both local and migrant labour, it is not difficult to manage the labourers. This situation works in favour of the brick kiln owners.

Brick-making process and division of labour

Brick-making involves a low technology and is characterised by distinct division of labour. Starting from moulding till extraction of the baked bricks from the kiln, the division of labour based on the nature of work is seen. The moulders are the largest concentrate of workers and they come at the beginning of the season i.e., in the month of October/November and a month later the other category of workers follow. Once the other category of workers follow the work at the kiln becomes a simultaneous activity. The sequential track ends once the moulders have prepared bricks to fill half the kiln. The job of moulders is laborious and forms the base of the kiln. The pace at which the kiln will operate, the number of rounds that the kiln would make in a season and the optimization of production all largely depends on the speed at which the moulders work. Though only men are involved in molding, stacking, firing, where as women are involved in carrying bricks from one place to the other. However, the study revealed that women are also involved in moulding. These women are mostly the migrant. Men also involved in transporting bricks from one place to the other. Men carry bricks by wooden cards or cycles where as women carry the bricks over their head. The employers maintain a register to keep the account of piece work of the workers to facilitate payment of wages as per their work. The brick-making process involves the following:

1. **Digging the Earth & making clay brick:** The process of brick-making involves digging the earth and making bricks from the clay. They prepare the pits, dig the raw earth, make the dough by continuously sprinkling water on the earth and shape the rounds of mud into bricks with the help of wooden mould provided by the brick kiln owner. The shaping of round is either done by women or children. The process of moulding is mostly done by men. But in few cases moulding is also done by women. After the bricks are moulded, women and children (in addition to the work that they do along with the *pathera* in other processes) carry them to be spread in the sun. They turn the bricks on all sides for even drying. The *munshi* make the record of the number of bricks moulded.
2. **Transporting the clay-bricks to the kiln:** They carry the *kutchra* (unbaked dried bricks) to the kilns. For this purpose, they use both men and women. Men are engaged in carrying bricks from the trenches located in far of places. Women are engaged in carrying the bricks from the nearby trenches. Men use cycles (of their

own or given by the owner) and wooden cards to carry the bricks whereas. They are also *cycle party*. Women carry on their heads up to the kiln, they are called as *Reja*. This category of labourers is also paid per thousand bricks. The division of labour is reflected in terms of assigning the task of carrying the bricks from one place to the other.

3. **Stacking the clay-bricks in the kiln Beldar (Stacker):** *Beldar* (stacker): One who arranges the bricks in the kiln for firing which is called *bharai*. It is done by men only. They are paid per thousand bricks. It is also deemed that the carrying of bricks is an unskilled job.
4. **Covering the stacked bricks with mud & gravel: Rapaswala (Brick-coverer preparatory to firing):** *Rapaswale* (they level the stacked bricks with earth and make them ready for the burning process to begin.
5. **Firing the clay-bricks Jalaidar (Brick-firer):** *Jalaidar*(Fireman): These workers fire the kiln and watch continuously if the bricks are being properly baked. This is done mainly by men.
6. **Unloading' or retrieving the bricks from the kiln & Sorting Nikasiwala (Burnt brick unloader or retriever & Sorter):** *Nikasiwala* (unloader): They are employed to take out the baked bricks from the kilns and sort and stack them according to the grade of bricks. Both men and women are involved. Again men carry the bricks on their bicycles and wooden carts and women on their heads.

Besides, there are *munshis* who maintain the accounts (includes payment of advances to the contractors; advances are made by them through the contractor every fifteen days to the workers to maintain their living expenses; supervise the work, and make payment to the *jamadaars* and *chaukidars* who keep a watch over bricks and their makers. There is no interchangeability of roles among the worker. There is another category of workers who are called loaders who only load the trucks carrying the bricks to the market/clients.

Sardars:

The contractors (*Sardars*) are of two categories – one who is the contractor of the *Patheras* (moulders) and the other is a contractor for the *beldar*, *nikasi* and

rapaswale together, and for the *jalaidar* as well as the *kumhar*. The commission paid to the contractor is on the following basis: The contractor for the moulders is paid per thousand bricks produced; the other contractor gets paid a certain amount that covers the wage rates of *nikasi*, *rapaswale* and the *beldar* and he gets a commission on each of the sub category at per thousand rate. For the fireman the contractor receives one months' salary and for the other categories such as the loader the contractor receives per thousand too. Very few are women sardars in Barak Valley. These women are relatively older and the resident of nearby locality. There are only four women sardars I come across in my survey. The *munshi*, the *chaukidar* and the driver is paid directly by the owner and the contractor receives no commission on those payments.

Commission per category of work paid to the contractor

The discussion with the workers and the owners of the brick kilns revealed that they do not pay any other payment to the contractors except a commission on the total number of bricks produced by the different category of workers. When the owner settles on the wage rate for the brick kiln workers officially, he includes the commission to be paid to the contractor from the wage – meaning that this commission comes from the labour of the workers and is already built into their wage.

The moulder and the Fireman works the longest hours. The Fireman works twelve hours a day and so does the moulder along with the family members. If a moulder works twelve to even 14 hours a day and produces a maximum of 1200 –1400 bricks (including family labour) then his wage rate at 8 hrs working day works out to be pittance as mentioned earlier. Even the minimum wages in the schedule based on per thousand rate fails to reflect the number of workers employed behind each thousand bricks produced and therefore the surplus labour that is generated through the invisible workers such as the women and the children.

Moulders are the worst victims of the labour process too. The unpaid labour component is quite high for the moulders. Moulders are the first batch of workers to come to the kiln. Not only does the worker build a dwelling place in his own time but along with this, a suitable piece of earth is selected by the labourer which is cleared of

all foreign matter and is made as fine as possible for the best results in brick-making. No payment is made for this work.

In the beginning, for about a week, the moulders have to sustain themselves with the advance money paid to them back in their village. The workers also mention how every fortnight “since supplies are not available on the site, it can mean half a day’s loss of work”. Also “there is a loss of some workdays, as when the man goes out to bring the supplies or in case of ill-health etc., when no payment is made” to this may be added the days lost during the winter rains and breakages, not to speak of other reductions arbitrarily made by kiln owners. The practices resorted to by them are no secret. The workers have their notebooks for example where they try to maintain account of how many bricks they have produced during the day. Most of them are illiterate and depend on the contractor to write the account of their day’s work. But the kiln owners do not regard these books/accounts as any genuine as much as the accounts maintained by the accountant maintained by the owner, who work in the interest of the owner.

Payment to the workers is made once in a week and that is not considered as payment but advances towards their running cost of living (*Khurakhi*). These amounts do not match up to the value of their work and wages due to them in accordance with what they have produced. They receive only about 25-30 per cent of their wages. The money given to them towards expenses and the advance that they have taken are both deducted at the end of the season when the final payment is made to the workers. In a way, the workers are held back by the owners and the contractors till they have earned enough to pay back the advance and the amount that they have been given as expenses although the expense money comes from the workers labour and from his unpaid wages. It is not easy for the workers to leave the kiln as and when they wish to look for better or alternative work opportunities. The circumstances smack of element of bondage. Although there has been considerable expansion of the trade this has resulted primarily in increasing sharply the amount of initial loan/advance to perhaps trap labourers in a serious debt trap. The working conditions have not improved but the burden of advance has increased. The payment and hours of work continue to be determined by the traditional coercive mechanism of over work, piece rate, family labour for the wage of one (knowing very well that a single labourer cannot earn the per thousand rate on his

own and more), holding back wages by paying enough to subsist and carry on working till the end of the season etc.

The earnings from the brick kilns are for a period of five to six months depending on the nature of work, for example the moulders start to work from November till April and the others all come a month later when substantial number of bricks are moulded and ready to be stacked and fired. The rest of the year the workers depend on their income from the agricultural sector mostly in the capacity of agricultural labourers. Their landholding status proves that the majority are either wholly agricultural labourers or poor peasants combining self cultivation with agricultural wage work. At the end of the season when the workers go home, they often find that they are left with just the money to pay for their travel back home with the family and no more after deducting the advance and what they had been given for their survival for the months that they have worked. The difference between what they have earned and the amount that they settle with the owner and the contractor gives them the extra earning with which they hope to go back to the village and manage their expenses along with earnings from the village till it is time for their return to the kiln. Those who are left with no difference take an advance from the contractor with the promise of returning the next season. The contractors negotiate from a different economic position but often belong to the same caste as the workers and hail from the same village. The workers mentioned that even if they want to run away from the oppressive working condition and labour relation they do not wish to embarrass the contractor who is one of their own and they can resort to him for loans when they need to back in the village. The average monthly income of the workers (depending on the number of working hands, family members, adult, child component) and earning from the village combined works out to be as follows:

Habitat Scenario

- The moulders live in the open under a temporary tent made of bamboo and tins in some cases temporary brick structures are provided for the workers- a room size of 8x6 ft

- The firemen live together under one roof on the kiln in a room size measuring 8x6 (housing 4 Firemen)
- No drainage facility
- No open space for cooking
- The workers and their children are exposed to the fumes the whole day and at night
- Interestingly, liquor shops selling locally brewed liquor are conveniently located and easily accessible to the workers.

Organisational status:

The workers engaged in brick kilns of Barak Valley are not organised by any unions. The workers complained that no unions are advocating for the rights of the brick kiln labourers. For any help economic and social, the workers only interact with the contractors. The workers do not even speak to the owner of the kiln. The owner does not know the workers by name or any aspect of their lives.

REFERENCES:

Government of Assam (2000): Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Guwahati.

Government of India (2000): *Basic Statistics of North East Region*, North East Council, Ministry of Home Affairs, Shillong.