

CHAPTER 8

Chapter - 8

CASE STUDIES

Based on the experiences from the field work I tried to document the stories of women working in brick kilns of Barak Valley. Discussions with the brick kiln workers revealed that they perceive the work in brick kilns as life saving strategy. They see it as a survival strategy, though it is tough and toiling. The stories of migrants reveal that under extreme conditions they migrate. With the advent of their unemployment and low wages at their place of origin, it is difficult to sustain with more number of children. Every year they come and work in brick kilns as there is surety of getting work here. During initial days of migration these women used to assist their husbands in brick moulding. Eventually they learnt brick moulding. From last several years they are engaged in moulding the bricks and their children assist them in brick-making.

A typical day for the migrant family

The day starts early for the kiln workers especially the moulders. The woman has to complete the cooking and washing by 6 am so that she can join her husband in the process of brick-making. While she is completing her housework, the man sprinkles water on the earth prepared the last evening into a dough. He kneads it with his feet to make it more pliable. Some times children also help them in kneading. If there is a young daughter she may help the mother in cooking and the mother can help in breaking the clods of earth too. After the dough is ready the woman hands over the rounds (lumps) of mud and the man shapes them into bricks with the help of a wooden mould provided by the kiln owner. He keeps the prepared bricks on the wooden planks also provided by the owners. The women and the children work alongside and that is how the children too learn their work and grow up to be moulders themselves. Then the women and the children take the moulded bricks to spread in the sun while the man continues to mould. The bricks have to be turned on all sides for even drying. This work too is done by women and children. The morning shift is up to 2 pm. With a break for lunch the work is resumed in the afternoon. Before retiring for the day the earth is dug

and dough is prepared for the next day's work. Women and children supervise the water channel while the men dig the earth with a shovel. At 6 p.m the man relaxes, smoking and talking to his friends or just sitting on the cot in front of his hut, while the woman gets busy with the cooking of the evening meal and sleeps only after she has served the food and washed the utensils. This is the picture of minimum work roster on a kiln for a moulder, that is 12 hours. Field work show that very often the workers carry on till seven to seven-thirty in the night having started at 5 in the morning, with an hour's rest around 2 p.m.

The payment day is the holiday for the entire workers in the kiln. On this day also the migrants family work up to the noon and go for taking their weekly wages from the owner through their contractor. Husband goes to market to bring vegetables and the other essential grocery. In some cases women also go along with her husband. The entire payment for their work is adjusted at the end of the season when all advances are adjusted as explained earlier in this chapter.

Group Discussion with Migrant Labourers

A meeting was held with nine workers of the brick-kiln, at their work site. The migrants are mainly from Bihar and Jharkhand, as it is already discussed in earlier chapters that men from Bihar don't bring their women to work in brick kilns. However, the migrants from Dubri and Kokrajhor of Assam who migrate along with their family. The review of the source villages suggests that women migrate only to those near by areas and not the far off places for instance the economically depressed migrants are mainly from Dubri and Kokrajhar of Assam. All the migrants from the villages of these districts are living in kuchcha houses with no electricity facility.

They are provided with accommodation made of thatched houses. There was no sanitation, no bathing facilities and no electricity in the camp. Workers engaged in loading and unloading work from 9.30 am to 1 pm and 2 pm to 4 .30 pm. While low-caste Bihari labourers specialised in moulding bricks and Bengali labourers (mostly Muslims) continue themselves in moulding from early morning to late evening hours. The discussion revealed that, unlike Biharis and Jharkhandis, Bengalis could not endure carrying bricks and considered it a menial task.

The main occupation of these workers is brick kiln work and also had the experience of working in construction industry. But the women prefer to be in the agriculture. They work at the kiln for five to six months a year and the rest of the time they are back to the village and some among them continue to work elsewhere. They are brought by the contractor who belongs to their own village.

The workers are paid on the basis of piece rate and currently they are paid Rs 300 per thousand bricks. The *patheras* prepare 1200-1500 bricks after working for 12 – 15 hours. They work as a team of husband and wife and I also noticed children under age 14 years helping their parents. Food is prepared by the wife and she takes it to the work site – the family often does not return home for lunch. The *patheras* work round the clock, the family divides the work amongst them with each contributing on an average 14 hours a day.

The family/worker is paid every fifteen days an amount to take care of their subsistence (*Khuraki*) and this amount too is treated as advance and the full amount of their seven days work is not paid to them. Their initial advance and the expenses that they have incurred during the period of the work season is all deducted at the time of final settlement i.e., at the end of the season of the work cycle.

The women and children are not on the muster roll of the contractor or the accountant of the kiln. Only the male members are counted as workers although the women work equally along with the men especially as *patheras* (moulders) and as *nikasi* (those who clear the kiln of the burnt bricks. In all other job category at the kiln women do not contribute. In those categories men are involved who are employed on monthly salary.

The labourers were unhappy with their living conditions. The rooms which were made for the workers, (in fact they make it themselves with material provided by the owner), are barely 8 ft by 8 ft and there is no separate provision for kitchen. One such hut housed eight persons. There were no toilets and no private bathing place for the workers. Their children are not properly taken care of by their elder siblings. Because of the extreme heat their children suffer illness. The information regarding the school going children of both local and migrant suggests that the migrants have in many instances discontinued their children's education. The educational back ground of the

migrants shows that they are predominantly illiterates and are more vulnerable in terms of continuing their children's education. The workers wanted crèche, schools more than crèche, and said that as they stay six months at the kiln, their children could go to school even if they may not have the opportunity to continue with schooling back in the village. The workers were indeed very keen on schools for their children. None of the workers wanted their children to continue to work in kilns. Few respondents said that because of their frequent migration they could not continue their children's education.

The labourers are given an advance before they are brought in to work at the kiln. This advance the workers mentioned goes towards paying of debts, interest on the debts incurred in the village for daughter's marriage, treatment of family member, consumption expenses, and loans for other social ceremonies. They also have to leave some money behind with their family especially old parents who are not in a state to come to the kiln to work. The amount of advance varies according to the need of each worker. The majority of the workers were landless labourers or owned small patches of land which barely meet their consumption requirement for more than two months. Most of the workers have a little homestead back in the village which they lock up and come to the city to the kiln with all their belongings. The workers belongings were meager.

The nearest access to a medical centers are two to five kilometers away from the site. The workers did not come out clearly on any dispute between them and the owners that may have reached the courts.

The moulders complained of disruption of work due to rain which results in loss of work days for no fault of theirs but they experience a loss of work and wages. The workers dues are adjusted at the end of the season. According to the contractor, the family can return home with Rs. 7000-8000 rupees, while the workers pointed out that they barely manage to take home Rs. 3000-4000 and sometimes receive nothing after adjusting their advance. They said their whole life is spent in just keeping their body and soul together on a daily basis and they are unable to make any plans for the future.

The workers are however not all organised under one contractor. The moulders are all under one contractor and the *nikasi*, *beldar*, and *rapaswale* are under another contractor. For the last three categories the contractor receives his commission per thousand bricks is included in this amount. The contractors who brought them here

receives Rs. 10 per thousand from the wages of the workers. Without any physical labour the contractor earns his livelihood out of commission i.e. he gets Rs.10 per thousand.

The worker manages to keep track of the amount of bricks prepared or produced by him/team but that is also the bone of contention. The system of finalizing payment at the end of the season too leaves room for irregularities and dispute.

None of the workers had access to a ration card while at the kiln nor can they exercise their voting right while at work at the kiln. The workers are a large floating seasonal labour force of the informal sector. The scale of the kilns depend on the size of the kiln and gets expressed in terms of the number of bricks produced per day and lines in the kiln. Given the system of organisation of the work force, there is no provision for provident fund or gratuity, even though the workers have been engaged in the same work for the last ten years –those ten years have not been at one kiln.

The accountant maintains a record of the number of workers present for the day which establishes that there is a pattern and logic to the number of workers for the day, number of holidays, while ensuring production of the given capacity of the kiln. The workers reported no tension between themselves on the lines of caste or religion, but did mention that they do have arguments amongst themselves over the children and their fights with other children.

1. Sakhina Bivi (migration discontinued child education)

Sakhina Bivi belongs to Badua pada village, Rani gunj of Dubri district of Assam. Both husband and wife work in the kilns. She started working in brick kilns even before her marriage. She used to accompany her mother in carrying bricks. Every year they migrate to Karimganj to work in the brick kilns. They are booked in advance by the brick kiln owner through the contractor who is from their village it self. They receive money in advance which is of very useful for meeting their expenses.

Like every year this year also they migrated because of indebtedness. They have a debt of about Rs. 5000 for the treatment of her husband who met with an accident while working in the railway track work. They took an advance of Rs. 2500/- from the

brick kiln owner and paid the same to the money lenders in the village. It was convinced that the repayment will be made from their monthly earnings. Apart from bearing the expenses, some amount of money is being paid to the money lender from their native village.

The family background of Sakhina Bivi reveals that it is comprising of her aged in-laws and four children (two daughters and two sons). The in-laws are at their native place to take care of the house. She also knows moulding bricks, which she learnt after her marriage. Earlier she was engaged only in carrying bricks. Both husband and wife together can mould around 6000 bricks per week. Based on the piece rate wages, on an average they earn Rs.1800 per week.

Their migration has got a direct bearing on the children in terms of education. They take their children along with them to get assistance in their work. Her son- Sophikul Islam who is just 14 year old is also engaged in moulding bricks. His name is not on the muster roll. He is studying in 7th standard. Her daughter- Monira begum who is 12 year old and studying in 5th standard takes care of her youngest son who is just 15 months old. She also assists her in cooking, fetching water, cleaning etc. Her younger son is 7 years old but not yet admitted in the school. The children come for the season but once they go back they continue their education. As a result they are lagging behind in their studies.

The parents are aware about the implication of their migration on their children's education but the elders in the family at native place are not in a position to take care of their children. She said that her son may continue his education but they will discontinue her daughter's education. She says *"My children want to study, but being employed here it is difficult to take care of them. Unwillingly we bring our children with us to work here as a result their studies get hampered. Though, they continue their education but unable to cope up with the loss of studies. Their future is at a stake"*

During off season her husband sells boiled rice to earn their livelihood. Because they don't have any land at their source village, she is engaged in others fields as wage labour. The availability of work is not continuous. Most of the time she works even for less wages.

She says that she is not aware of any government legislations but she knows that

Government does nothing for the poor. She says nobody pays attention to the poor. They are vulnerable to diseases. At the end of the season hardly they could save anything from their earnings.

2. Geeta d/o Motilal: (Chief earner of the family)

Geeta is 19 year old a resident of Dharamkhal tea garden area. She joined brick kiln work 5 years back when she was 13 years age. She is engaged in the work of loading and unloading of bricks. Her first experience of working was at the age of 11 years in the agriculture. She used to go with her mother to the farm field to help her in her work. Eventually she learnt the farm work and continued working in the fields on payment basis. She used to get a meager wages ranging from Rs. 10 to Rs. 15 a day.

Her mother had an experience of working in brick kilns for around eight years. Because of her illness she discontinued. Geeta used to accompany her mother once in a while but became regular when her mother's illness increased. Though her father knows carpentry work but the meager earnings from his work were not sufficient to run the family. Due to that she could not continue her studies and left the school after second standard. As both the parents go out for work, she used to take care of her younger brother. As a result, she could not get her education though she wanted to get educated.

Now her brother also started working to supplement the family earnings. He is working as daily wage earner in the town. She says, *"I am working because we can have better food at home. Though my younger brother started working to support the family, he doesn't get the work regularly. In this situation it is mandatory for me to support my family. So my self decided to support my brother to run the house. I should not shy that I am working in brick kiln because work is work and it is far better than begging"*.

She gets up early in the morning to perform all the household chores before she go for work. Her mother assists her in cleaning utensils and cleaning the house. She tries to finish all the work in the morning only, as in the evening she can't get any help from her mother because of her eye sight problem.

She says, *"I can't bear the expenditure on her treatment. I am the life line of*

running the family. My contribution is must without which running the family is a distant dream”.

She says, *“Politicians talk a lot about, but do nothing for us. I am not aware any laws meant for us. There are no laws for the poor. The only law rules us is the work for life. If we work then only we can live otherwise not”.*

3. (A Case of women headed household)

Shanta Tati is 26 year old belongs to Ujaan kupha of Hailakandi district. She is the only bread winner and staying with her brother. She started working in brick kilns only after her marriage. Her previous experience of work is only in agriculture with her mother. She entered into this work three years back when her husband migrated to Meghalaya to work in coal mines and could not return back and so far no communication from him. Her husband took some money from the relatives with a promise that he will send money regularly to pay back their money. With no news from her husband the relatives are demanding their money. Her brother could help partially and now she is working to pay back the rest of the money. To sustain her livelihood she migrated to Hailakandi and staying with her brother who is working in Tea Garden. She would like to give education to her only son. She says, *“Because of illiteracy my husband could not find better work here. I don't want to see my son as sufferer due to lack of education.”* Now her son who is nine year old is studying in fourth standard. She is earning a meager amount of Rs.160 per week from brick loading and unloading. She is the only bread earner in the family. However, at the time of crisis situation with regards to expenses relating to her son's education she get financial assistance from her brother. She works for eight hours a day. Everyday she spends half an hour for walking to reach the kiln site. She has to complete all the household chores before she leave for work. She says that with no other options left she would like to work in brick kilns during lean season. After the work in brick kilns she work in agriculture as wage labour in others field.

4. An educated Working woman

Sumitra (19 years old/ unmarried) has completed her SSC and completed her training in Anganwadi. Now she is being working in an Anganwadi as temporary staff. She works in the brick kilns as a part time job. Everyday she works for three to four hours after attending Anganwadi centre. Out of compulsion she is working here from last three years. She is engaged in loading and unloading of bricks. The number of dependents are more with no employment. The illness of her mother is also a significant factor. Earlier her mother used to work in brick kilns. Now because of her illness she discontinued working in brick kilns. She would like to work in brick kilns until she gets a permanent job. She says, *"I am not ashamed of working here in brick kilns. My co-workers were sometimes sympathetic with me as all of them know about my family condition."* The flexibility of working there also a pull factor for being employed in brick kilns. It doesn't need any skill.

She wanted to continue her education but because of her parents financial inability she could not continue her education. She says, *"It is not affordable for me. My brothers are young and my being engaged in work helps them to continue their education. I am trying my level best to do my responsibilities"*. Though she know that she can get free education but still she says that it is not affordable for her.

5. Dropout from school due to child care responsibility

The story of Mallika (23 years) brings out the indirect implications of working in brick kilns on her younger sister. She is working in brick kilns from last three years. She started working to supplement her family after getting separated from her in laws. After marriage she started working. She is having one son (5 years) and two daughters Sanjecta (3 years) and Suman (1 year). With no other alternative, she called her sister Roma from her mother's village which is 50 kms to look after her children. Last year also she called her sister to stay with her as long as she works in brick kilns. This is the time when she works in brick kiln and her husband Kanro goes for cattle rearing. He earns Rs.500 per month from the cattle rearing. So the child is not properly taken care of. During this period her sister stays with her to take care of her son. Her stay away from her village has resulted in the discontinuation of her education. Last year she could not

pass her sixth class and retained in the same. This year also she has come for the season that means she may again disqualify for sitting for the annual examination. Though she do not want to disturb her sister's education but no other alternatives are there for her. During off season she is engaged in farm labour work but with less frequency. During this period when my husband is at home I go out for work in agriculture.

6. Najima Bivi: Problems due to illness of husband

Najima Bivi is a migrant labour from Dubri district of Assam. She entered into brick kiln work after her marriage. It was out of compulsion due to her husband's illness. Her husband does not earn because he has been suffering from tuberculosis from last two years. She borrowed money from the money lenders for the treatment of her husband. Still he is not recovered. He is at home and not in a position to work. Because of lack of money and other earning members in the family she started working in brick kilns. Now she is the only bread earner in the family.

This shows that due to ignorance about the free treatments facilities from the government programmes. She along with her children has migrated to this place to work for the season. She is not in a position to give education to her children because of her meager earnings and burden of household responsibility. As a result of her children are not enrolled in school.

7. Saraswati Patro (Emerging *sardar* i.e. labour contractor)

Saraswati Patro is recognised as *sardar* who had an experience of twenty years working in brick kiln for twelve years. From last three years she is acting as *sardar*. Now she could establish her credibility in her own community. Now, though she is not working in the brick kiln, but she is supplying labours (who are mostly from her own community) to the kiln owner. In return she gets commission from the owner which is Rs.5 per the transportation of 1000 bricks. This year she supplied around 10 to 12 women workers to the kiln. She gets the advance money from the kiln owner and she give advance to the labourers who would like to engage in the kiln. The workers are accountable to women *sardar*. This is an exception case in Barak valley that a woman

got promoted to the status of sardar. But this is generally viewed as only the job of men and women can't control.

8. Abused by husband

Suma Mala Patra is 27 years old working in Pankaj brick kiln. She was married to Nitu seven years back. After married they got two daughters namely Mangala (5 years), Tuni (2 years) and a son, Sonu (1 year). In due course of time there was quarrel between husband and wife. Her husband started drinking and beating her. One day he beat her and injured her head and threw her out. With no option left she came back to her mother's place in Silchar. Immediately she started working with a kiln nearby her mother's house. Her mother arranged a small accommodation for her nearby theirs. With no alternative, she was forced to work. In the last season, she worked for the whole season and earned her livelihood. She says that I could not get any other job. She is involved in loading-unloading bricks. She says that she would like to give education to her children. She says, *"At least I am not begging. This is my known place and I can support my mother in case of her illness"*

9. Ill health- still working

Saptami Baraik is 25 years old and married. She is having a daughter of six years age. Saptami studied up to high school and left the school because of her marriage. Her husband is illiterate and do not have any regular employment. She started working in brick kilns only after her marriage. She had an experience of working in tea gardens during her childhood days. She has been in brick kiln work from last four years. She is involved in transporting bricks from one place to the other. She is suffering from the problems relating to her menstrual periods. Because of excessive bleeding she got anemic. She borrowed money from the local money lenders and spent on her treatment which was around Rs. 5000. Since her husband also does not earn regular wages, so she decided to work and the work in brick kilns is easily available. Though she is not keeping well she has to work to sustain her family.

10. Death of husband

Sapna Mall is 22 years old women having one son of 4 years age. Her husband died recently. With no other options left she started working in the brick kilns. She is staying with her mother in law who is 55 years old and also engaged as wage earner. Her being employed in brick kilns is of major help to both of them. From last two years she is engaged in brick kiln industry. At present she is the only bread earner in the family and taking care of her mother in law. He mother in law is taking care of her son when she is in the kiln. She says, "*My mother-in-law is taking care of my son, I can work with out any loss of time*". She also prefer to work in brick kilns because the brick kilns are located within half kilometer distance from her residence. She feels comfortable as most of the co-workers are also from the same area. Before working in brick kilns she had an experience of working in agriculture as wage labour. With the lack of support from the government programmes, she feels that with whatever meager earnings she could support her family.

Discussion with the brick kiln owners:

The owners of the brick kiln industry seems to boast about providing work to these workers when they are in need of it. They see themselves as the saviors of the poor and vulnerable by giving them an opportunity for their survival. The NGOs working in Barak Valley do not seem to have a proper framework for addressing the problems of the brick kiln labourers. The scattered nature of brick kiln workers is also a limitation for the NGOs to work with. Half of the workforce in brick kiln is comprise of migrant labour. The problems associate with brick kiln industry is with regards to its status. The brick kiln industry has not gained the status of an industry and still fall under the category of cottage industries. There is a need to formulate a framework to work out the parameters of the industry of brick kilns, and plan the nature and form of mediating bodies between the workers and the other actors from the employers' side of the structure of the industry.

Discussion with owners of the brick kilns revealed that the owners feel that giving advance to the workers is an important factor to retain workers for the work. It serves the purpose of the labourers when they are in need of money. The system of advance is a way to ensure a regular and disciplined labour force for the kiln. Giving

advance to them increases the owners bargaining power and lessens the workers bargaining power in terms of deciding their wages.

From the view point of workers, the system of advance is important to sustain their livelihood system during lean season. For both the migrants and locale, getting money is very difficult. They also see the advance payment a cause for mutual trust, loyalty in terms of providing assured work for the whole season. The workers say that the lack of advance make them feel unsecured. There is always a feeling that their work may be discontinued due to sudden end of the season, lack of raw material, untimely rains etc. there is also a fear of being cheated by the owners.

The experience of owners also reveals that there is also the fear of being cheated and duped by the workers. Though they are accountable to the *sardars* who often come from their own village also had an experience of workers running away after taking the advance from the *sardar*.

The case of an exceptional brick kiln owner

A brick kiln industry in Karimganj is the oldest amongst all the brick kilns in Barak Valley. It is running from more than last twenty years. The owner of the brick kiln is having two kilns and located in the outskirts of Karimganj. Approximately around 200 workers are engaged in the kiln. Being the biggest kiln the production of the brick is depends upon the uninterrupted supply of labour. Realising the same the owner has provided a better arrangement of accommodation for the seasonal labourers come from different states. Unlike other brick kilns in the region, this is the only kiln where pucca housing facility is provided by the owner with electricity. He is with an idea of starting a school in the premises and engage one teacher to teach the children and patch-up the loss of children's education. While sharing the experience of bringing labourers from different states, many labourers by thinking that they will migrate to work in brick kilns and no need to admit their children in the school. He encouraging them to keep their children in the school and assured their education. He says that migrants should feel secured being working in his kiln and should also get benefit of education to their children. He conducted health check-ups camps for the workers engaged in his kiln. The workers are made aware about the significance of drinking water for being free

from illness. He says, "*If the workers are suffering from illness, they can not give their valuable labour which results in the production of bricks*". The owner ensures that the water in the pond in the premises should be utilised judiciously and should not be allowed to get polluted. He made arrangement of bore wells for drinking water. It was found that the workers would like to work under the same employer every year. It was also observed that the women from the near by villages (such as Nilam bazaar which is 20 kms from the kiln) also staying at the kiln so that they can avoid the daily traveling and can give more time to the kiln.