

Another brick in the wall

Written by [Sreenivas Janyala](#) | Updated: December 20, 2015 9:31 am



After 6 months of work, most return with little in pockets. (Express photo by Harsha Vadlamani)

Eight hundred kilometres from home, squatting in a brick structure that he calls home and that can barely accommodate one person — sitting — Purnachandra Jani shrugs, “We have to keep running.”

For the 28-year-old, that means making the annual six-month trip from Malisira village in Balangir, Odisha — one of India’s poorest regions — along with nearly 70,000 like him, to work in brick kilns of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, for minimal wages and desperate conditions, to pay off debts run up at home for the rest of the year.

The death of a pregnant woman allegedly after she was beaten by the owner of a brick kiln on December 1 followed the 2013 incident in which two workers had their hands chopped off by labour contractors. Rights activists and even the labour commissioner of Karimnagar district of Telangana call their working conditions “appalling”.

Still, the migrants from Odisha keep coming, to areas more known for Naxal violence.

The cycle, as Jani explains it, can’t stop. “We are never rid of the debt. It always hangs on our heads, like a sword. We have to keep running, earn money, whatever the conditions.”

The November-June brick-making season (ending before the start of monsoon) is into its second month. It is 4 am and still dark as KBD Bricks kiln in Raghavpur in Karimnagar district slowly stirs to work for the day.

While the temperature will shoot up to around 30 degree Celsius later, making it uncomfortable around the hot brick kilns, dawns are cold, and from the 40-odd dwellings, sounds of children sniffling, wrapped in little more than torn bedsheets, are the first signs of day. Bonfires were lit at night, but the flames died a long while ago. Fires are lit again in the morning, but to make thin, watery tea.

In the expanse stretching for half an acre on either side, there is no electricity for the workers, the flickering fires their only light. Karimnagar has at least 180 such brick kilns. Most of the workers are from the Odisha districts of Kalahandi, Nuapada, [Nabarangpur](#) and Balangir. This year, there are 17,325 of them here.

Telangana and Andhra Pradesh together have more than 15,000 brick kilns, employing over six lakh workers, both local and migrants.

Officials of the State Labour Department, Odisha, say that last year, over one lakh workers went through middlemen to work in other states under the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 — most of them to the brick kilns in Andhra and Telangana. The

middlemen scout for workers on behalf of the brick kiln owners.

A statement by Odisha Labour Minister Prafulla Mishra in the Assembly in 2014 said there were 3,044 registered labour contractors through whom 1.19 lakh people had migrated to other states.

The dwellings for the workers are 6×4-foot structures, basically bricks that they stack one upon another when they arrive at the kilns. At the KBD Bricks site, at least 200 workers are migrants from Odisha.

There are no toilets, so the men head out to nearby empty stretches carrying water, for their morning ablutions. The women will go once the men are back.

They must be at the kiln by 4.30 am, where the munshi or supervisor is waiting for them impatiently.

Kailash, the supervisor, makes an imposing figure under the high-power halogen lamps that light up the half-acre in the middle of darkness at KBD Bricks where the bricks made the previous day are kept in neat piles. As Lakshmi bhajan in Odiya blares from a loudspeaker, the workers fall into rhythm. Families, including children, work as a unit, mostly in groups of four. Children are not officially on hire, but they pitch in.

As his wife hands over balls of clay-fly ash mix, Suhas Manjhi, 22, standing waist-deep in a pit — a position more comfortable than squatting — puts it into moulds, to make four bricks a minute. His sister-in-law Sushma carries these to a spot several feet away, where the bricks will be left to dry for three days.

The three arrived in the first week of November. “There is no work back home in Balangir,” says Manjhi. “The rains were not good last season and all the families migrated.”

Manjhi is confident that at the end of the season, after he has paid off the Rs 72,000 advance he took from the contractor and the Rs 6,450 received as weekly allowance, at Rs 250 per week, he will take home about Rs 10,000.

Once the bricks are partly dry, they are stacked to form a pyramid. After around one lakh of them have been arranged thus, the kiln is fired to heat the bricks for least 12 days. The baked bricks are then transported out in trucks.

Suhas Bhoi came from Balangir on November 14. He prefers sleeping in the open, to the dark huts. Most men do that, he says, especially during summer.

Bhoi, 32, who is here with his wife and five-year-old son, worries more about the water they drink. There is not a single tap for the 150 workers. So, he says, “we go to the tank and bring water for drinking, cooking, washing etc”. It is the same tank from which water is taken for use in the kiln.

At SVB Bricks, on the outskirts of Peddapalli in Karimnagar district, around 150 people are crammed into 30 dwellings.

The average target for a group of four is 2,000 bricks a day, going up to 3,000. Brick kiln owners pay Rs 200-Rs 500 for a thousand bricks. The workers start at 5 am in winter and work till 10 am, with a 10-minute tea break at 7 am. They return to their dwellings for lunch and rest, and resume work at 4 pm (skipping the afternoon heat). In peak summer, work starts around 3 am and goes on till 8 am, before the afternoon shift.

It's the length of the afternoon shift that is contested. Workers say they are given a target and have to complete it, no matter how late they finish. Owners argue that workers never stay back after 10 pm. “We do not force them. If they decide to leave, we will lose all our money,” says K Venkateshwarulu, owner of VSR Bricks.

As per a 2014 Labour Department report of then united Andhra, the minimum wage per thousand bricks was Rs 292 and the Variable Dearness Allowance Rs 129. But the VDA amount was never paid, the report said, and the workers ended up making about Rs 300 per thousand bricks.

The bigger brick kilns make up to 30 lakh bricks a season. A load of thousand clay-flyash bricks can get the owner Rs 4,200.

One week after they arrive at the kilns, the workers get their first payment. “We pay Rs 250 per person per week so that they can buy food etc,” says S Siddhaiah, owner of NBC Bricks.

The workers go to the weekly market at Peddapalli town, 30 km away, to purchase rice, vegetables and cooking oil. That's their

staple, says Sitaram Manjhi, who is at NBC Bricks for the sixth time.

So while a family of four can make about Rs 60,000 in a season, once the advance is paid to labour contractors and the weekly allowance of Rs 250 deducted, not more than Rs 10,000 remains. Many, acknowledged the Andhra government report, return with nothing in their pockets.

“But if we manage to make more bricks, we get more money,” points out Dhananjay Jhagat, 35, of Nuapada. Jhagat, who has been coming to SVB Bricks for nearly eight years, voices the hope driving this migration. Most of the Odisha migrants are landless labourers back home. Between November and June, there is no agricultural work in their non-irrigated districts.

Sushama Dhanuji, whose husband works as a supervisor-cum-brick maker, says hundreds of villages in Odisha’s Kalahandi and Naupada, become empty between November and June.

Jitendra Bag, 37, from Palipada village in Kalahandi district, says it is much easier to get an advance from a “sardar (middleman)” and work and food in a brick kiln 800 km away, than to get even 100 days of full employment from the government back home.

Says a labour contractor from Kalahandi referred to as ‘Chotu Khan’, “Each person takes a minimum advance of Rs 18,000. Large families take up to Rs 1 lakh in all. They use the money to pay off debts, or use it for marriages or to purchase gold ornaments.”

It was shortly after Nuakhai (the festival of harvest) on September 18 that Bag had taken an advance of Rs 34,000 and left for Telangana with his four-month pregnant wife Surya and two young children. Another 110 people of his village had made their way along with his family to SVB Bricks at Hanumanthunipeta.

Bag says they were made to work for long hours, and the food they could buy was never enough.

On November 30, Surya fell ill with high fever. Bag says he pleaded with the kiln owner’s men to take his wife to a hospital, but they refused. “They asked me who will do her work. When I argued with them, they started kicking her,” says Bag.

Surya died in a health centre the day after. Owner Adasumalli Shyam, 28, and three supervisors have been arrested. Shyam’s brother Adasumalli Ravi says Surya probably died of exhaustion.

In most cases, even if they are threatened or face exploitation, workers do not know how to seek help. “We hardly know in which panchayat area the kiln is located. How do we know where the nearest police station is?” says Suhas, the worker at SVB Bricks.

Superintendent of Police, Karimnagar, D Joel Davis says they don’t receive many complaints of harassment, exploitation or torture from the kilns. “One reason could be that these workers are not allowed to move freely. Security guards keep a watch.”

Apart from the Surya incident, two cases have been registered in the last three years in Karimnagar.

The children are the worst sufferers. Krupasindhu Jani, 26, of Turukella of Balangir district arrived at SVB Bricks with 190 others, including 40 children. He wishes he could have left his children behind, but that was not an option. “There is no one with whom we can leave them,” says Lalman Manjhi of Lokapada. So almost all the children at the brick kilns have either never been to school or have dropped out.

Some kilns like SVB Bricks have started classrooms, but a single one caters to children of all ages. So 12-year-old Prabir who enrolled last year in Class IV in Odisha’s Naupada district now sits alongside four-five-year-olds. “I would rather play gilli-danda,” he says.

Kiln owners are supposed to take certificates from the Labour Commissioner to engage migrant workers under the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act. Similarly, the labour contractor has to take permission from the Labour Department of Odisha to take workers out of the state. Most of this remains on paper.

Karimnagar is a hub for brick production due to the availability of good clay. The introduction of fly ash by NTPC, Ramagundem, which gives it free to brick kiln owners, has boosted business.

Owners claim it is workers who hold the upper hand. Ravi, the brother of the owner of SVB Bricks whose workers left after the death of the pregnant labourer, says, “They left even before police completed the investigation, leaving us

with a loss of over Rs 10 lakh that we had given to them as advance.”

Dashratha Naidu talks of workers “fleeing at night”. “It is very common to see owners searching for them at the Peddapalli railway station.”

Roshan Pradhan, who is involved with the Human Rights Forum which investigates incidents involving Odisha migrant workers, says “the entire brick kiln industry is founded on exploitation of labour”.

The biggest loophole is lack of data, Pradhan adds. “Owners and contractors don’t maintain proper records. Also, most of the migrant workers from Odisha come illegally without registering themselves with the Labour Department of Odisha.”

Labour Department officials themselves are wary of using the term “bonded labour”. “This is not exactly bonded labour because the workers are not bound for life to work at a kiln. It is an informal agreement to work for six months in lieu of the advance paid to them. If a worker falls sick or leaves, it is not compulsory for his kin to complete the job or to return the advance taken,” an official says.

Kiln owners claim that every season, at least two or three persons run away. That is one or two in several lakhs.

A Gandhi, Deputy Labour Commissioner, Karimnagar, says there is no doubt the conditions the workers live in are “appalling”. “You cannot even call them huts... In such dwellings, couples, often with two or more children, live for six months.”

Krupasindhu Jani of Balangir says he misses his village all the time. “We spend six months here as well as there, but this can never be home.”

[With inputs from **Debabrata Mohanty**]