

LABOUR

Life and Death for Little Children at the Brick Kilns of West Bengal

BY G. ARORA ON 27/03/2016 • [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Credit: Monirul Islam Mullick

Kolkata: On February 14, Chandni Rajbanshi – three years old – was playing catch with her cousin Swapna. They raced through the Teena Brick Works in Pundaooh, in the Hooghly district of West Bengal, where their father Uday Rajbanshi was a labourer. It was Sunday morning and most of the kiln-workers were resting.

Ten-year-old Swapna had caught up with Chandni, and lifted her in her arms, when she stepped on a plastic sheet – the lid of a furnace, which split and dropped both girls into the flames. It required a backhoe excavator to lift out their remains four hours later. All that could be found was a hip-bone. The accident might even have gone unnoticed except for another child playing nearby who saw the two girls fall.

“Had the child not witnessed that, everything would have been brushed off by lodging a missing complaint at the police station,” Uday Rajbanshi, Chandni’s father, told *The Wire*. “We would have lived in hope that the girls were only missing and would return to us. The endless visits to the police and the apathy of cops would have left us even more frustrated.”

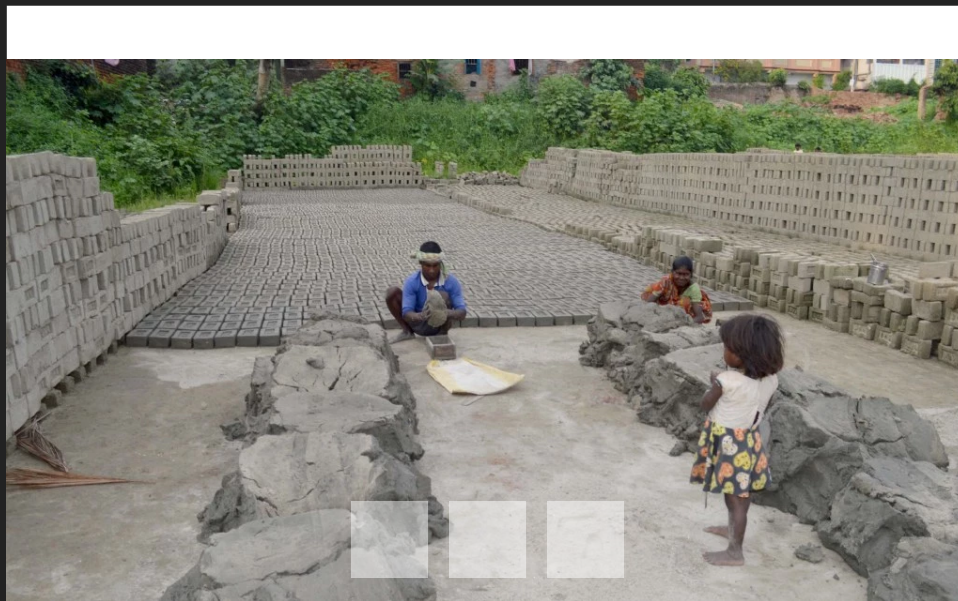
When we met Uday Rajbanshi at Teena Brick Works, a few days after the accident, all he was asking for was a few thousand rupees to go home to Bihar with his wife and two other children. His co-workers said that he had lost an earning member of the family: He and his wife Soni Devi had adopted Swapna, their niece, after her own father died. She would help at work-sites by fetching water or molding the mud.

“The legal system and endless court battles is not for the poor people like us,” Uday said. “Our dreams are limited to arranging a meal a day for the family. I’d rather return home with some money to look after my children than run after justice which I know I will never get.”

A two-member district child protection team had visited the spot and reported to the district magistrate that children were working in hazardous conditions here, with no health or safety provisions. “We wrote to the administration that laws were completely violated – both for adults and children working at the kilns,” said Harik Banik, one of the team members. “We also found that children had no access to education and most of them suffered from malnutrition. The labourers were denied of gratuity and other service-related benefits.”

Soni Devi, Chandni’s mother, expanded on the allegation. “They refuse to make payment unless we use our children to expedite the work,” she said, wiping tears from here yes. “The job is seasonal, so owners want to get maximum bricks manufactured. We and our children worked like slaves, more than ten hours a day in the sun.”

The family’s apprehensions about the justice system seemed to be confirmed by the apathy of the district administration.



Credit: Monirul Islam Mullick

Praveen Tripathi, the SP of Hooghly, failed to provide the exact status of the case. “I think the accused has obtained bail from the

local court, but I am not sure. I have to check whether the accused has escaped or is out on bail. I will soon get back to you,” he said, before hanging up.

Sanjay Bansal, the district magistrate of Hooghly, said he had written to the Disaster Management Department about compensation for the family, but had not followed up on it. When informed that the family had received nothing yet, he promised to investigate. He has since been moved to another posting.

West Bengal has around 12,000 brick kilns, which employ an estimated six lakh people, many of them migrant-workers from neighbouring districts in Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha. According to the 2011 census, there were 550,092 child workers in West Bengal, a figure which is likely to have increased since.

Nearly every brick-kiln owner that this correspondent talked to claimed to provide humane living conditions to their workers. “We offer them better living conditions, basic civic facilities, education for their children and health facilities for the workers and their families,” said Kundan Singh, who owns a kiln at Bally in Howrah district. “We ensure that all the laws guarding them have been properly implemented.”

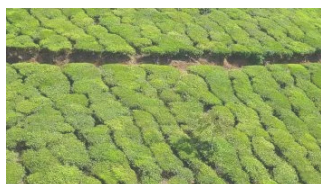
On the ground, however, a different story is visible, of apathy and negligence towards labourers’ conditions. Squalid quarters are nothing more than the four walls devoid of any facilities. Most do not have fans, even though the summer is considered peak season for brick production. Toilets are rare on the premises and open defecation is common. Brick furnaces emit fumes that are toxic to the eyes, lungs and throat, but workers say healthcare is limited to emergency first aid.

In the election season, the labour department is reluctant to look into the issues. “This is not a correct time to talk about the matter

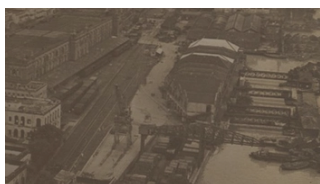
as polls are approaching,” said a top official of West Bengal’s labour department, requesting anonymity. “We will discuss it after the formation of the new government.”

G. Arora is a freelance journalist living in Kolkata.

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