

Socioeconomic Status of Brick Workers in Coimbatore

Dr. R. Santha & Mrs. C. Athena, M.Sc., M.Phil., MBA

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Abstract

Brick-making is one of the most ancient industries. India is the second largest producer of clay fired bricks, accounting for more than 15 percent of global production. India is estimated to have more than 100,000 brick kilns producing about 150 – 200 billion bricks annually. Brick industry in India is employing large number of migrant workers including men & women and even children who work in the kiln on a temporary contract and low wages. Hence the researchers have made an attempt to study the socio economic condition of the brick workers in the selected brick kilns of Coimbatore.

Keywords: Bricks, Brick kiln, Migrant workers

Introduction

Brick-making is one of the most ancient industries. The craft is as old as the Indus Valley Civilization (2500 – 1500 BC). Brick kilns in India produce around 200 billion bricks and it is the second largest brick producing country after China. According to Indian Brick Manufacturer Association, approximately one lakh brick kilns are operating in India which employs more than four million workers. Most of the workers are migrants who belong to economically backward and underdeveloped regions of the country and normally hail from low income and socially disadvantaged section of the society.

At the global level, Asia is the major player with regard to brick production. Asia contributes 87 percent of total brick production in the world. Six countries, namely China, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Nepal represent 75 percent of the Asian population and are the major brick producing countries. China contributes a maximum share of 77 percent and India is the second largest brick producer contributing a share of 15.5 percent. In India, brick industry is one of the traditional and highly labour-intensive industries.

Though one of the oldest industries in the history of mankind, brick industry in India still remains unorganized and no official authentic data is available regarding its status. The National Commission on Rural Labour estimated that there were about one million workers. But

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according to the All India Brick Kiln Manufacturer's Association, its membership extends up to 22000 units with about 3 million workers.

The entire process of recruitment, transit, working and living conditions in the brick kiln is a testimony and indication of existence of severe form of human bondage. The organization of work is highly influenced by sociocultural factors. Migrant in general and traditional 'low – caste' family labour in particular, continue to characterize labour in the brick kilns.

The pattern of labour recruitment in the brick kilns and the mechanisms of deployment, payment of advances and wages bear a striking similarity across the country. As the kilns are operating in the remote areas they mostly remain unregulated and wages paid are very often less than the statutory minimum wages. The wage payment systems are different for different processes and the labour contractors are usually paid a commission through an informal deduction from the labourer's wages.

There are varied natures of problems the brick workers are facing now. They have no unions or legislation to protect them. There are no proper drinking water or sanitation facilities. They are also exposed to health hazards like water-borne and skin diseases and even respiratory disorders.

Good, favourable socioeconomic condition of the workers may act as a booster, which, in turn, may establish congenial industrial relations. In this backdrop, an attempt has been made with the following objectives:

Objectives

1. To understand the nature of work in the selected units;
2. To analyse the socio economic status of the selected workers in the units;
3. To find out the problems of the workers and
4. To give suggestions for the uplift of the brick workers.

The various dimensions of brick workers have been studied by a number of researchers including Pallab Kanti Ghosh (2008), Amal Mandal (2005), Dharmalingam (1995), Saran & Sandhwar (1990), and Aggarwal (1959).

Descriptive and Analytical

This study is both descriptive and analytical. The study is descriptive in explaining the nature of work in brick kilns and analytical in analyzing the socioeconomic status of the brick

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workers in the study area. The study has used both primary and secondary data. The study was carried out during 2011-12.

Sampling Design

As per the unpublished records of the Coimbatore Brick Kiln Owners Association, there are 458 brick kilns in Coimbatore. Out of 458 kilns 10 percent of the kilns were selected for the study based on convenient random sampling. In each kiln, five workers were interviewed of which 40 percent were skilled workers, 40 percent were unskilled workers and 20 percent were women workers. Accordingly 230 respondents were interviewed.

Tools Used

The data was analysed using Chi-Square test and Sen Poverty Index. Chi-Square analysis was used to find out the association between the extent of poverty and size of the households. Sen Poverty Index was used to find the intensity of poverty.

Analysis & Interpretation

- 80 percent of the respondents were male workers and 20 percent workers were female workers.
- 57 percent of the respondents were in the age group of 31 – 40 years.
- 41 percent of the respondents had just primary school education only.
- 63 percent of the respondents do not possess the voter's identification card.
- 54 percent of the respondents do not have ration card.
- The toxic items consumed by the respondents are liquor, cigars/ tobacco and pan. 67 percent of the respondents are addicted to liquor.
- 59 percent of the respondents were having two members as earning members. 69 percent of the respondents were having family income of Rs. 6000 – 9000.
- More than 90 percent of the respondents possessed mobile phones.
- 58 percent of the respondents were saving through nearby grocery shops.
- Around 84 percent of the respondents were having debt and the major reasons include inadequate and low wages, seasonal nature of job, visit to their native place and payment of old debts.

- The hypothesis of the Chi-Square test postulates that there is no significant association between the extent of poverty and size of the family. For that purpose a two-way table was framed.

Table 1
Extent of poverty and size of households

Size of poverty	Respondents below poverty line	Respondents above poverty line	Total
Up to 4	25	122	147
Above 4	02	81	83
Total	27	203	230

Since calculated χ^2 value is greater than $\chi^2_{.05}$ for U is equal to 1 degrees of freedom hypothesis is rejected and thus there is association between the extent of poverty and size of households.

Sen Poverty Index also implied that the intensity of poverty in the selected area is very less (only 2.4 percent).

$$P = H [R + (1 - R) G] = 0.12 [0.1884 + (1 - 0.1884) (0.0143)] = 0.0240$$

The extent of poverty is very less in the selected area because of two main reasons: (i) construction industry in Coimbatore region is witnessing a boom and consequently the brick making sector is facing huge demand and labour shortage and (ii) high wages are offered in the region due to the concentration of textile, hosiery and engineering industries. This was also supported by the study of Bhukuth Augendra in ‘Labour in Brick Kilns: A Case Study in Chennai’ and also in *The Hindu* article ‘Brick Industry in Doldrums in Coimbatore’.

- The variety of work in the brick kilns includes machine operator, cutting raw bricks, extracting clay, crushing and grinding, mixing clay, carrying clay, loading and unloading, pulling a wheel barrow and other functions. 22 percent of the respondents use sun hats and only 12 percent of them use working shoes.
- 88 percent of the respondents work on contract basis and receive wages accordingly.

- 98 percent of the respondents are not getting work all the days in a year since the nature of work is very seasonal. 65 percent of the respondents go to their native place during off season.
- 80 percent of the respondents want to upgrade the technology to improve the working condition.

Suggestions & Conclusion

The living conditions of the brick workers are very basic and shanty-like. There is a need to provide adequate housing facilities at the brick kilns. By increasing the access to microfinance, brick workers can be empowered and their exploitation can be avoided. There is a need to provide some useful skills to the women like tailoring, needlecraft, poultry raising and dairy farming which can supplement their income especially during off season. Worker friendly technology can be introduced to reduce the hardships associated with brick work.

The growth in India's economy and population, coupled with urbanization, has resulted in an increasing demand for residential, commercial, industrial and public buildings as well as other physical infrastructure. Building construction in India is estimated to grow at a rate of 6.6% per year between 2005 and 2030. The brick production process is mainly based on manual labour. One of the special features of the brick kiln workers is that they may be one of the most vulnerable and excluded workers-communities of Indian society. Hence, there is an urgent need for social concern to frame measures to improve the living and working condition of brick kiln workers for inclusive growth.

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Dr. R. Santha, M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil., Ph.D., MBA
Associate Professor & Head
Department of Economics
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Coimbatore 641 004
Tamilnadu
India
santhamrs@gmail.com

Mrs. C. Athena, M.Sc., M.Phil., MBA
Assistant Professor
Department of Economics
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Coimbatore 641 004
Tamilnadu
India
athena@psgrkc.com