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LANGUAGE BARRIER AS A MEDIUM OF IMPRISONMENT IN THE BRICK
KILNS OF WEST BENGAL

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Abstract:

It is a well-known fact that bricks are regarded as one of the basic units of constructions. As urbanisation has progressed at a full-tilt pace over the last two decades in the state of West Bengal, the demand for bricks has increased too. With the spurt in construction activities in the suburbs around Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, dealing in construction material has turned out to be a profitable trade. The demand for bricks, sand and cement has led to a spur in illegal procuring and manufacturing of these aforementioned articles which might be regarded as the bread and butter of construction activities.

Owing to this high demand, there has been a spurt in the number brick kilns in the suburbs of West Bengal. However, the brick kiln industry is largely unorganised and employs unskilled labourers. The labourers chiefly hailing from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, are mostly landless farmers. Many of these labourers are trafficked to these kilns with promises of some degree financial stability and imprisoned by the system of bonded labour. These labourers hail from very backward areas in the respective states and

are illiterate. Many of them know only the local dialect of the area where they hail from. As a result of this, their interaction with other people beyond their own community, in the brick kilns where they work are largely limited.

These labourers are unaware of the minimum wages which they deserve for their toil. Neither are they aware of the various Labour Laws or rules of employment. As a result of this, they are duped into toiling for long hours at very low wages. Their inability to communicate with others owing to the language barrier renders them unable to seek a better life elsewhere. Once duped into coming to the brick kilns via promises of a better future, these people fall prey to a system of bonded labour¹ which, in its essence, resembles the ancient system of slavery.

Entire families comprising of husband, wife and children slave away in these brick kilns, enduring severe poverty, malnutrition and various other forms of exploitation until they die prematurely from the stress. Their inability to communicate even in Hindi, which majority of people all

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over India are often partially-versed in, render them unable to express their hardship and suffering to organisations which protect a citizen's basic and legal rights. The employers are often aware of this shortcoming of the labourers. This Achilles Heel² of the labourers is often taken undue advantage of. The language barrier has served to strengthen the shackles which bind these unfortunate people to the brick kilns and to a life of wretched misery.

Keywords: Brick kiln, language barrier, pidgin, creole, illiteracy, bonded labour

Introduction:

Emile Zola's *Germinal*³ has often been regarded as one of the most significant novels in the French tradition. The novel was an output of Zola's painstaking research about the lives of the coal miners in the mining towns of North France. During one of his visits to the mines at Anzin, Zola noticed a workhorse dragging a sled piled with coal through a tunnel. On

inquiring the miners about how the horse was taken in and out of the tunnel every single day, one of them said, "Mr Zola, don't you understand? That horse comes down here once, when he is a colt, barely more than a foal, and still able to fit into the buckets that bring us down here. That horse grows up down here. He grows blind down here after a year or two, from the lack of light. He hauls coal down here until he can't haul it anymore, and then he dies down here, and his bones are buried down here." The horse may very well symbolise the condition of the miners who descend to the coal mines as children and toil until they drop dead and are buried, often literally, down there.

The vivid descriptions from the pages of *Germinal* may find a parallel in the brick kilns of West Bengal. Children as young as ten years of age are often found toiling day and night along with their parents. They toil from a tender age and toil through life until poverty and malnutrition reduces them to skin and bones until death prematurely claims them. The darkness surrounding their existences is intensified by their illiteracy.

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A brick kiln in Nilgunge, close to Barasat in West Bengal.

The lack of education often renders people unaware of what the quality of life should be like. This lack of education among the labourers in the brick kilns is further intensified by their linguistic limitation. Most of them are unable to converse in Hindi which is a barrier-breaking language in the Indian scenario. These people only know how to talk in their own respective local dialects, which most others are largely unacquainted with. As a result, they remain largely removed from the outside world and are even unable to communicate with organisations which might have helped them. It also happens

that this language-barrier often discourages other people from taking the trouble to interact with them too. So these labourers remain hopelessly confined within the boundaries of the kilns where they work, mute spectators and sufferers of a system that exploits them physically, mentally, financially and even at times, sexually, unable to find a way out. Cut off from the outer world, the labourers are often rendered as blind as the horse in the Anzin mines. Poverty and exploitation crushes their spirits leaves them unable to even attempt an escape from their misery.

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Labourers at work in a brick kiln.

In this paper, I have tried to trace how inability to communicate in a barrier-breaching Indian language has imprisoned the labourers in quite a few of the brick kilns in West Bengal in a system of bonded labour that resembles slavery in its very essence. The field visits for this paper were conducted in a couple of brick kilns in the area of Nilgunge which is located in the vicinity of the Barasat town in West Bengal.

Methods:

Finding out how the language-barrier serves to imprison the labourers in the brick kilns to their wretched existences proved to be an arduous task. This was largely owing to the language-barrier which

rendered me unable to have any largely meaningful conversations with the labourers during my field visits to two of the brick kilns in Nilgunge. The reluctance to converse on the parts of the overseers in the brick kilns also added to the impediments that I was facing with soliciting information.

However with the help of Mr Suraj Ali, who independently works for the upliftment of the children from the brick kilns, I was able to put together some information regarding the way of life of the workers and the exploitation that is rampant over here. I was also able to form an idea about how the language-barrier serves as a mode of imprisonment in the brick kilns.

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Children of the brick kilns with Mr Suraj Ali.

However, it is to be mentioned that owing to the limited interaction with the workers in the brick kilns, the validation of a few observations in this paper may be subject to questioning.

Observations:

It is a well-known fact that those who live in the veil of poverty are often enticed by dreams of a little more financial security. This vulnerability to enticement is often taken advantage of by middlemen who lure the uneducated landless farmers from the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and

Jharkhand and traffic them into the brick kilns of West Bengal. These landless farmers who are often born in debt, live in debt and die in debt are trafficked⁴ away from a feudal system of bonded labour into the jaws of equally-exploitative machinery.

Most of the labourers in the brick kilns around Nilgunge hail from the state of Bihar. Bihar is a land of multiple languages. The language wise division in Bihar is roughly as follow:

Region	Dialect
North Bihar	Maithili, Vajjika
South Bihar	Magadhi
Eastern Bihar	Maithili
Western Bihar	Bhojpuri
Central Bihar	Vajjika

In the villages, these languages have been combined for a long span of time to give rise to a variety of unnamed pidgins⁵.

In linguistic terms, pidgins are simplified languages that develop as a means of communication between two or more

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groups that do not have a language in common. However, there may be structural similarities between the mother-tongue languages of the groups. In many of the villages, these pidgins have, over time, turned almost into creoles⁶ and by extension, the mother tongue of the

residents. Thus the villagers are often unable to converse in any other language but the one which they have been acquainted with since birth. This proves to be a barrier to communication between them and the local community beyond the walls of the brick kilns where they serve.



Moulded bricks waiting to be hard-burnt.

It is a time-tested fact that communications become difficult in situations where people don't understand each other's language. The inability to use the language used by people beyond the boundaries of the brick kilns renders the labourers unable to convey their plight to the organisations which might have helped them. Once trafficked from their native villages, these labourers have very little options to turn to in a largely alien land. So great is the impediment posed by the

language barrier that the tales of exploitation in these kilns rarely make it to the outside world.

The Supreme Court of India has interpreted bonded labour as the payment of wages that are below the prevailing market wages and legal minimum wages. Unaware of any labour rights or laws, the workers in the brick kilns languish in a state of poverty. Families comprising of husband, wife and children are often compelled to

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work as a single unit in the kilns. A very minimum payment is made to the head patriarch of each family based on the number of bricks moulded. Roughly they get paid a very meagre amount for every

thousand bricks moulded. So very often, children below legal age take part in the brick moulding process in order to maximise family income.



Photograph of children from the brick kilns (above)

A girl nurtures her younger sibling while their parents work in the kilns (below)

The living conditions as well as the way of life of the labourers in the kilns are nothing short of appalling. Crammed in dark shanties, often devoid of electricity, which serve as their quarters, the labourers

are often deprived of the bare necessities of life like a square meal, proper clothing and access to clean drinking water and basic hygiene. Sometimes even infants are carried around the musty premises of the

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kilns by their elder siblings who work in the kilns themselves. The communication barrier is often strengthened by repressive policies of the managements in the kilns who allow the labourers to step outside for a few hours only on Saturday afternoons to buy a few provisions from the local market (hat) outside. Their inability to express their

plight owing to the language barrier is sometimes preyed upon even by the likes of sexual predators from within and beyond the boundaries of the brick kilns as their voices, if ever heard, are never understood by organisations protecting legal rights of human beings.



A shanty which serves as a living quarter for the labourers of the brick kilns.

Conclusion:

The problems posed by language barriers are manifold. Ranging from limiting the capacity of individuals to learn from their environment to prevention of free flow of information between groups of people, it has often been shown to have stunted the growth of individuals. In case of the labourers in the brick kilns in West Bengal hailing from the backward areas of

other states, the language barrier has proved to be a medium of imprisonment. It has resulted in them avoiding communication with the world beyond the walls of the kilns. As a result, the oppression which they are subject to goes largely unreported and unnoticed. Chained by the language barrier coupled with illiteracy, they would perhaps be unable to escape the kilns even if they wanted to or ever question the

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oppression which they face on a daily basis. Thus, once trafficked into the grisly existence of brick kiln labourers, they slave away, victims to the oppressive system of bonded labour until poverty, malnutrition and multiple forms of exploitation crushes them physically and spiritually, often pushing them towards premature death.

Footnotes:

1. Bonded labour- The Supreme Court of India defines bonded labour as the payment of wages that are below the prevailing market wages and legal minimum wages.
2. Achilles Heel- A weakness or vulnerable point.
3. Emile Zola's *Germinal*- The novel 'Germinal' by Emile Zola is considered one of the most significant novels in the French tradition. It portrays an uncompromisingly vivid and realistic description of the lives of the coalminers in Northern France as well as their strike in 1860.
4. Human trafficking- The unlawful act of transporting, coercing or guiling people in order to reap the benefits of their service, typically in the form of forced labour or sexual exploitation.
5. Pidgins- A grammatically simplified means of communication that develops between two or more

groups that do not have a language in common: typically, its grammar and vocabulary are limited and often drawn from several languages.

6. Creoles- A Creole is a stable natural language that develops from the simplifying and mixing of different languages into a new one. Very often a creole may also be a pidgin which has evolved into a full-fledged language and adopted by a particular population of people over time.

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