

INCREASED SOCIAL VULNERABILITIES OF BRICK KILN WORKERS IN THE WAKE OF FLOODS, 2011: CASE STUDY OF SANGHAR, SINDH

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ABSTRACT

Heavy rains followed by floods caused unprecedented loss of agriculture and infrastructure in central and lower districts of Sindh in August and September, 2011. Besides livestock, homes and other pieces of valuable property were washed away or severely damaged by the floods primarily due to overflow of drains. Including others brick kiln workers bore major losses as they were/are most vulnerable segments in Sindh. These workers have less social and state support in any disaster as there is no mechanism of social security in place to lessen the difficulties of these two groups. Subsidies announced by the government normally do not reach these because laws which regulated the bilateral relations of brick kiln owners and brick kiln workers are not implemented in letter and spirit. This paper is based on empirical evidence.

INTRODUCTION

Sindh province of Pakistan was still busy in reconstruction process as river floods of 2010 has destroyed majority of the right bank towns and villages when rain floods started in the southern districts of Sindh. One month prolonged seasonal monsoon rains caused heavy flooding throughout Pakistan from mid August to mid September in 2011 but some districts of Sindh Province were affected badly. Despite below the normal monsoon rain forecast, the rain came heavy and caused huge flooding resulting in overflow of drains mainly affecting districts of southern Sindh. In the affected districts floodwaters devastated towns and villages, washed away access routes, downed power, communication lines, and inflicted major damage to public and private infrastructure. Many key roads and major bridges were damaged. Resultantly, socio-economic conditions worsened the living conditions of communities residing in the flood affected districts. Vulnerable

people, in addition to the challenges of limited excess and mobility, were at higher risk of disease and socio-economic disruption.

These rains caused widespread breaches in the agricultural and saline water canals, particularly in the Left Bank Outfall Drain, which exacerbated flood impact in Sanghar, Mirpurkhas and Tando Mohammad Khan districts. Outflow of the draining flood water was due to poor maintenance of infrastructure and drainage routes. Flood waters stagnated in most of the affected regions for the months to follow. Situation of the people who were forced to leave their homes had sought refuge on higher grounds, along roadsides and on bunds, while others were housed in schools and other public shelters. Access to safe drinking water and health services were very rare. With an increasing number of people uprooted as a consequence of the situation, ensuring emergency shelter and food for the population was unmanageable and critical because most of the areas were not prepared for that gigantic disaster. With other poor people of Sindh, brick kiln workers bore heavy damages and loss due to rain and brick kiln making, their only source of livelihood ceased. Thus, they were left with no option but to live on charities provided by government and non-government organizations. Majority of them took more loans and advances from brick kiln owners to feed their families that resulted in their labour sold to employers.

METHODOLOGY

This study is mainly primary in nature, however supplemented with secondary data. To collect primary data rain-flood areas were visited to interview the affected brick kiln workers and their community leaders. For secondary data, reports, articles and newsletters were retrieved from the internet.

BRICK KILN WORKERS AND THE FLOODS OF 2011

Brick Kiln sector is sector which serves as mainstay for exploitation of around 2 million workers connected to it (<http://ochaonline.un.org/humanitarianappeal/webpage.asp?MenuID=15482&Page=1998>). Denial of their legal rights by the kiln owners and lack of awareness among workers of their rights, low wages, debt bondage, forced custody of kiln workers is the reflection of the

exploitation they have been going through for years. The workers of this sector have been suffering from multiple forms of deprivation on the basis of caste, creed, nationality, religion and occupation and are denied access to social services and financial assets in these districts.

District Sanghar is one of the districts of Sindh where thousands of peasants and brick kiln workers work under debt bondage. In Sanghar there are 156 brick kilns and more than 18,000 people (including women and children) work on these brick kilns. It is obvious that disruption and damage caused by these floods would automatically give way to more unemployment and people already in poverty will take more loans to survive. Resultantly the employers will exploit this vulnerability of workers and give loans and advances on strict terms favoring the employers. At the instance of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Government of Sindh started registration of brick kilns. In this registration process, names, addresses and exact number of workers working at each brick kiln are not accounted for. Likewise, majority of workers in district Sanghar is not registered with government, thus unable to get any social security benefits and live and work in miserable conditions.

There are hundreds of thousands brick kiln workers, already living in slavery like conditions caused by debt bondage, who have been severely affected by heavy rains followed by flood in Sindh. It is important to know the nature of brick kiln industry and environment of the workers they work in, before we describe the extent of damage caused by rain/flood.

During the monsoon season brick kilns regularly are closed for one month on yearly basis and open again when monsoon season is over. Normally during that period brick kiln owners provide some financial help to the workers as advance which is paid back by the workers when work starts at brick kilns. This time the brick kilns were closed 15 days before the usual monsoon because of the country-wise strike of brick kiln owners as government had raised 15% tax on brick kiln industry. (<http://www.nation.com.pk> 20 September 2011). First spell of monsoon started when that strike was on and the workers were already off the work and on financial help of brick kiln owners. As the monsoon rain got prolonged and the breaches of canals started

sweeping the houses/villages of brick kiln workers, the owners of brick kilns pull back themselves by leaving the workers in plight.

Besides, because the brick kilns is made of mud and chimneys of brick kilns are very sensitive to water/rain, the employers themselves bore major loses as many of the brick kilns were damaged severely so they are not willing to support further to workers. As after the rain/flood water was over, all the brick kilns needed a thorough repair or construction. This meant the workers would remain unemployed or without work for months to come and would be living in acute poverty. In one of these cases, the authors visited a brick kiln workers' village Bachal Bodani in taluka Shahdadpur of district Sanghar. This village consists of 325 households and 95% work on nearby brick kilns. All of them are bonded labourers as they take advance and work on terms and conditions of brick kiln owners. They all are without work since June, 2011 when strike of brick kiln owners was called. They are living in miserable conditions and are totally helpless to earn their livelihood.

As many of the brick kiln workers take loans and work against advances, they work in slavery like conditions. Their employer has every right to use their souls (<http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/pakistan-floods-uncover-evidence-of-feudalisms-impact-on-poor>/<http://socialistpakistan.org/?p=545>). Many brick kiln owners have shifted their workers forcefully to their other brick kilns in Pakistan. In one of these cases, the authors were told that 35 workers 8 women and 11 children were forcibly shifted from Shahdadpur to Sukkur by Ahmed Khan Pathan, a brick kiln owner who has many brick kilns in the country. These workers belonging to Bheel and Christian communities were working against the loan of Rs.170,000 and after flood the owner took them to Sukkur to pay his debt off.

FLOODS, INFLATION AND FOOD INSECURITY

According to UNISEF the women and children of Sindh have been victims of severe exploitation at the hands of feudalism and have suffered like this for thousands of years due to the feudal system in the province (McBride 2011). Lack of basic health facilities at local level in rural areas is widespread (*Ibid*). Flood exacerbated the difficulties faced by people in flood affected area.

With rare sources of income and shortage of food stuff in market, the inflation rate has gone high. These floods have multiplied the food security problems in these areas and most victims are again women and children.

In the wake of the floods, many renowned economists anticipate that due to poor food production inflation will keep on soaring (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/oct2011/paki-o19.shtml>). Low income groups will be badly affected due to constant increase in the prices of essential food items and frequent hikes in petro based products that further aggravate the situation. The catastrophic loss of livestock, crop lands, and extensive damage to the infrastructure, are projected to have long-term negative effects on food security and economic performance. Based on last year's (2010 Floods) experience, some medium and long-term consequences of flooding can be projected. Lost livelihoods for farmers (e.g., not being able to plant next season's crop) and a diminished food supply is a key concern. Already threatened by famine and disease, the plight of the flood-affected is being exacerbated by the rising prices of food items. There is an inherent risk that the prices of essential food commodities may spiral, as witnessed during and after the great floods last year. Take sugar for instance, the deterioration in sugarcane yield and quality would mean diminished sugar availability in Sindh after the upcoming crushing season. The affected people have been left to their own devices to survive in the impossibly difficult situation. After this natural calamity, a man-made crisis is likely to unfold and that would definitely leave deep imprints on the lives of two marginalized groups like brick kiln workers.

CONSEQUENCES OF FLOOD

The floods in Sindh have exposed another long standing issue in brick kiln sector, that is, the legal aspect. After the floods when thousands of brick kiln workers were displaced with their belongings destroyed, government is announcing subsidies to this sector but the big beneficiaries are only employers and not workers. Because no regulation is in place and brick kiln owners are not compelled to share the subsidies provided by the government with brick kiln workers so it is more concerning that poor workers are left more vulnerable to the exploitation of

employers. This was reflected in our group discussions with workers in Sanghar who complained that the employers were not willing to waive off their loans and asking the workers to bear the losses caused by floods.

Among a section of populace already living under the poverty line, the women and children of peasants have bore worst consequences of these floods right from flooding, evacuation, camping and food and non-food items' distribution by both state and non-state machinery in the camps (<http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/media/docs/reports/Pakistan-Floods-2011-Rapid-Response-Plan.pdf>). In post-flood period, usually discriminated class of society face more difficulties and this was evident when it was observed that only women were bringing drinking water for whole family. If we compare women's health and clothing with that of men, it was surveyed that women were in bad conditions. Also, it was observed that women had more problems of privacy or in regard with their special needs in daily life. Apparently, Sindh has the worst rates of maternal health and child under nutrition in the country as exemplified by the nutrition surveys undertaken during the floods last year and confirmed by the recently concluded national nutrition survey (<http://piler.org.pk/Status%20of%20Labour%20Report%202010.pdf>).

Besides, aid and food stuff distribution has been very poorly managed. A society like rural Sindh divided on ethnic, religious, political and caste lines needs a clear structural and administrative set up to deal with post disastrous relief and rehabilitation activities. But in Sindh province, the National Disaster Management Authority and its provincial and district level units have not been able to provide adequate relief to most vulnerable groups like minorities and bonded labourers. This state of affairs was witnessed in particular in taluka Shah Karim of district Tando Mohammad Khan where flood victims told that they had not been provided any relief items because government gave trucks loaded with food and medicines to the leaders of their own political party and these leaders in turn provided aid to only their voters.

The massive displacement and disruption of these brick kiln workers as a result of floods would turn to push them further in the spiral of debt-bondage when they will have no option but to take

new loans and fall victim to the debt-bondage which they could never be able to re-pay. Thus, the debt would give birth to the new generation of bonded labour in the areas. In rural Sindh, where, through a combination of wealth and religious standing, employers' power is most pronounced, thousands of laborers remain in bonded labor for debts accrued by their forefathers, and are confined to their villages to carry out hard labor till their death.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following suggestions are given to improve the conditions of these vulnerable groups of brick kiln workers.

- The government should directly pay the debt taken by kiln workers to the kiln owners after verification.
- A thorough and full-fledged research must be conducted covering all districts of flood affected in Sindh so as to gauge the extent of social vulnerability of workers in general and kiln workers in particular.
- Special focus should be given to brick kiln workers while announcing the relief and rehabilitation programmes.
- Marginal groups like Hindu *Dalits* must be given priority while announcing and implementing relief and rehabilitation plans. It should be ensured that in post-flood period, brick kiln owners must not exploit the economical and social vulnerability of the marginalized brick kiln workers. In this regard, media, civil society and government should work out a mechanism to avoid such incidences.
- The government agencies must make it sure that brick kiln owners are paying adequate wages to the brick kiln workers.
- Short-term and long-term plans should be chalked out for the livelihood of these vulnerable groups in affected areas so as to retard the economical vulnerability.
- Coordination mechanism for relief and rehabilitation should be streamlined among the different agencies working in flood affected areas.
- Government should revise the minimum wage of brick kiln workers to the level where they can live with dignity.

- Advocacy in property rights and legal advice and sharing information on retrieval of the legal documents may be provided by the government and non-government organizations to all vulnerable groups including women. In particular, the concerned government officials should be instructed to provide these services.

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