

NEWS WRAP

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Studies by labour advocacy organizations point to at least 200,000 Pakistanis, many of them children, working in more than 2500 brick kilns, across Pakistan. The brickmakers toik near the lowest rungs of Pakistan's economic and social ladder, forever at the mercy of heat, clay, coloured dirt, human greed and official indifference. Their plight around a dozen scattered chimneys of every brick kiln is well known, and often a national disgrace. They cannot be forced to work or be kept in bondage by law. But in reality, the great majority of the workers are bound to the kiln by debt.

The self-contained and primitive production system of Pakistan's brick kilns has altered little in generations. The labour emanetes from migrant families, provided by girls of age six to elderly grand fathers, who live in brick huts beside the kilns, and rarely leave the quarries. The workday starts at 4.30a.m, and by sunset a worker could finish 1200 bricks and earn \$ 3.50. Workers borrow when the wives need an operation, or if the rainy season extends too long. Borrowings from the kiln owners lead to debts staying for the whole life of a worker. If an indebted worker tries to escape he is hunted down. Sometimes the kiln owners chain or imprison workers. Reformists have initiated programs for brick kiln owners to forgive the debts of workers, and educate workers' children. The kiln owners are economically powerful and politically well-connected. Many brick workers are illiterate, nomadic, cut off from modern society, and unaware of their rights. The brick workers fall outside the labour force, and do not belong to unions or organizations. They are virtually serfs, with permanent debts tying most of them down to the kilns.

The brick workers never see the kiln owners. Every two weeks a manager arrives with a ledger that rewards their pay, and any deductions they went to make towards their debts. The workers are scarcely aware of the industry they serve. When building construction is booming, they must rush to fill orders; and when it is declining they abruptly get laid off. Most workers cannot afford to send their children to school. Some manage to buy the children books and shoes for only a couple of years, before giving up. The brick kiln work is an ancient assembly line, in which everyone knows his part, and there is no scope for supervision. While stacks of bricks are baked in huge underground ovens that are filled, emptied and refilled by hand, one brick at a time, the kiln chimneys belch black smoke throughout the day. Burns, from toppling hot bricks, are a routine hazard. The smoke from the kiln chimneys is toxic. Families migrate from one kiln to another. One of the few available means of acquiring enough cash to pay off debts is to sell kidneys in the clandestine organ trade. While federal laws against child labour and debt recycling are rarely enforced in Pakistan court system, of late there have been protests by brick workers against inhumane conditions, some of which have been organized by a national group called the Bonded Labour Liberation Front.

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According to India's District Level Household and Facility Survey (DLHS) of 2007-08, only 54.1% of India's children are fully immunised from disease. The other half, including the 11.3% who did not receive any vaccination, face the risk of disease, as they did not complete even the basic immunization schedule.

Uttar Pradesh has the lowest figure, with only 31.1% fully immunized. Rajasthan, Assam, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Jharkhand, Mizoram and Gujarat have crossed the 50% immunization mark; even though they are below 56%. Kerala, Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Daman and Diu, and Lakshadweep have achieved 79% to 87% immunization. The high dropout rates, where families do not complete doses as per schedule, and poor access to health care, contribute to poor immunization.

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The Bharat Nirman programs of India's political United Progressive Alliance (UPA) are caught in delays, and way behind targets. The irrigation target from 2005-09 was 10 million hectares, but progress has been made in only 6.5 million hectares. Slow land acquisition by the states, and their failure to contribute a matching share of the funds have caused delays. There has been delayed clearance of the projects by respective state environment and forest ministries.

The rural road component, under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana had a target of 3,40,316 km for 2005-09, but the union government has barely managed to construct 2,40,424 km. The union rural development ministry blames it on slow land acquisition and critical law and order problems in some states. There have been contractual problems and delayed environment clearances too.

Against a target of providing telephone connectivity to 32,518 villages between 2007-09, Telecom ministry succeeded in covering only 10,212 villages. There was a critical non-availability of satellite transponders. The Power ministry electrified only 24,000 villages, against a target of nearly 50,000 villages for 2007-09.

In cases of rural housing and drinking water, targets were exceeded. The government provided about 72,00,000 houses against a target of 60,00,000 houses. Potable water was extended to 6,58,000 villages, against a target of 6,03,000, during 2005-09. □□□