

‘Modern-day bondage’: Brick kiln workers and the debt trap in Pakistani Punjab

Tuesday 26 July 2016, by [DE LAURI Antonio](#) (Date first published: 21 July 2016).

Debt is everywhere a tool of social control, and no more so than in the brick kilns of Pakistani Punjab, where it travels across generations.

Contents

- [Debt bondage and the rise of](#)
- [Life and debt in the brick](#)
- [Debt: a social relationship](#)
- [Fictions of freedom](#)

Central and south Asian brick kilns have long attracted the attention of humanitarian agencies, activists and scholars as sites of severe labour exploitation. Brick kiln workers are routinely described as ‘modern-day slaves’ [1] in need of rescue [2]. But we need to go beyond this simplistic ‘victim paradigm’ in order to understand the *social nature* [3] of bondage as well as to situate that bondage within both local and global systems of domination and dependence. This is what I propose to do over the next 1000 words, using a case study of the brick kilns I researched in the Pakistani areas of Gujrat, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi in 2015 and 2016. First, however, we must understand the crucial role of debt as an engine of capitalism, as well as the ways in which it restricts the choices of nominally ‘free’ labour.

Debt bondage and the rise of Indian capitalism

Scholars of south Asia are divided over when and how capitalism first took root in colonial India (of which Pakistan was formerly part), yet most agree that it was already a reality by the late nineteenth century. One of its hallmarks was the growth of long working hours for low hourly wages in agriculture and industry, propelled by the imposition of debt.

Loans were given to workers in the ‘credit market’ at an exceedingly high price and then paid off in the form of low wages in the labour market. These wages were kept artificially low, ensuring the development of a cycle linking debt to labour dependence. Workers indebted themselves ‘voluntarily’ to help pay for their survival, and then had to ‘voluntarily’ take jobs which paid so little as to require their further indebtedness. This flow of demand for both credit and wage-labour was continual, with debt thus playing a crucial role in the establishment – and maintenance – of capitalism in the sub-continent.

Life and debt in the brick kiln today

Such dynamics are echoed in contemporary Pakistani brick kilns. My research focuses on those at

the bottom of the brick kiln hierarchy – people who typically work on piece rates to pay off debt accumulated with the brick kiln owner. This debt comes in the form of an ‘advance’ (*peshgi* [4]) that people take to pay for things like marriages or illness, or to buy material goods such as motorbikes. Although the debt is held by an individual household head, all household members are involved in producing bricks to pay it off. And since households face regular deductions as part of their repayments, they are often compelled to ask for additional advances, with the ensuing debt cycle ultimately transferred inter-generationally.

An example of this indebtedness is Faisal, who I first met in October 2015 at a kiln near Rawalpindi. He was 41 and told me that he had been living in brick kilns for 25 years. His son and two daughters grew up in brick kilns with him. “I didn’t realise I was not a free person”, he said, “until I asked for a second loan from the owner of the kiln. I was young at that time and needed money because my father didn’t have a job...There is no other way for people like us to get money”.

“I didn’t realise I was not a free person, until I asked for a second loan”

The lack of basic social and economic protection, as well as the lack of access to credit, are the fundamental prerequisites of this kind of debt-dependence. Faisal’s story is a case in point, as is Syeda’s. Syeda is an 18 year-old girl I met in a brick kiln in Gujrat in June 2015. “In Pakistan”, she said, “once you ask for a loan, you become a debtor forever. Nobody cares. We ask for loans as the only way to make a living”. When I met her again in February 2016, she was pregnant: “I have to keep working”, she said, “even if it’s harder now”.

Because debt dominates the entire horizon for people like Faisal and Syeda, it is fair to say that their future itself is bonded. But as Syeda put it, “If we were not here in the kiln, how could we manage to have a child? It’s a bad life. But at least it’s a life”. Bonded relationships can provide a measure of security in situations of grinding poverty and insecurity, and workers exchange their subservience for protection.

Debt: a social relationship

Yet a full picture of debt bondage under capitalism can only really emerge once when we bring ‘the social’ back into our analysis. “*Pesghi* is the only possibility we have to fulfil our duties in society”, Faisal explained to me. “There are several issues to think about – *dowry* [5] being a good example”. In his case, he also had to worry about remittances and the future of his children. These socio-cultural duties all require money – and when you’re too poor or too excluded to access cheap money, you end up needing debt.

Socio-cultural factors can be seen in other dynamics too. In Rawalpindi, the owner of a kiln explained to me that “migrants and low cast families tend to accept working conditions that locals would refuse. They are willing to live in a way that others would consider unbearable”. This often includes being deeply in debt and having that debt condition their labour. In part, this is the result of migrant and low caste poverty. But not solely. Low caste families, for example, also face radical social immobility due to their status, and debt offers them an alternative to street begging. Migrants, on the other hand, use brick kiln work as an alternative to escape agriculture, but their social and economic isolation strengthens the bonding capacity of the debts they accrue.

Fictions of freedom

Debt, in itself, does not lead to bondage. Rather, the potential for that kind of exploitation emerges out of the way in which indebtedness interacts with social, legal, and economic uncertainty, and with social and cultural inequalities and injustices. In situations of vulnerability and social marginalisation, debt can become the crucial link between a person's 'free' choice and their unfree life – to paraphrase Marx, they might 'choose' their indebtedness, but they don't do so in conditions of their own making.

This is what is hidden behind the narrative of workers 'voluntarily taking on debts that they must repay', which one often hears amongst brick kiln owners. Such monetary-individualistic morality obscures the way in which 'modern-day bondage' is deeply rooted in local social webs of inequality, with global connections and implications. A so-called 'free person' may well create her debt by using the system of loans and 'advances'. But in doing so she plays out at a micro level an entire macro context of inequality and dependence. And modern slavery experts would do well to take this into account.

ANTONIO DE LAURI

P.S.

* Open Democracy. 21 July 2016:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/antonio-de-lauri/brick-kiln-workers-and-debt-trap-in-pakistani-punjab>

* Research for this piece was carried out in the framework of the ERC GRANT 313737 - Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond: a Historical Anthropology (www.shadowsofslavery.org).

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/07/pakistan-kiln-workers-live-like-slaves-20147212238683718.html>

[2] <http://www.freetheslaves.net/tag/brick-kiln-slavery/%20%5D>.

[3] http://www.shadowsofslavery.org/publications/SWAB-WPS_1-2015_debtor_forever.pdf

[4] <http://www.punjablabour.gov.pk/article/detail/23>

[5] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/4866043_The_Economics_of_Dowry_Payments_in_Pakistan