

In brick kilns, a life of debt, abuse

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HYDERABAD: Each brick may cost Rs 5, but behind each one sold in Rachakonda police commissionerate is misery, sexual abuse and an adivasi family's battle for survival.

A day after 411 children were rescued by police and activists from Yadadri area, authorities said most victims from Balangir and Nuapada districts in Odisha narrated tales of despair.

From dawn to dusk, Kaya (name changed) and her three daughters lived a life of fear in the brick kilns as any delay in cutting the bricks would lead to wage cuts and physical abuse. According to child rights activists, sexual abuse and child abuse was rampant in the brick kilns.

"Our life runs on debt. We take loans for food, agriculture and now I have the huge responsibility of getting my three daughters married. We can never stop taking debts, we cannot pay them back till we die," child rights activist Kanchukatla Subhash quoted Kaya as saying. Employers who forced them into labour paid them a paltry weekly wage of Rs 300, police said. After demonetisation, the families struggled to fend for themselves for weeks without any money.

"For some time, our parents purchased subsidised rice from the black market and other groceries, but on most occasions, our parents skipped meals to feed us," said a rescued child. The children told police how they were housed in cramped sheds during their seasonal migration period.

Most of these families depend on agriculture for a livelihood and all of them depend on debts to get from one season to the

next. The adivasis take debts of Rs15,000 to Rs20,000 every year for their agricultural needs. After their failed attempts at farming, when its payback time, they have to work as bonded labour for the next six months.

From December to June, they work day and night without a fixed schedule with a day off once in 15 days. The brick kiln owners lure them with paltry money to make them work more to meet their quota of 2,000 bricks per day. "Exploitation and discrimination is a routine part of their life. An adivasi woman working in Karimnagar district was beaten to death by a brick kiln owner and the husband, who was tied to a tree was a witness to the entire affair," said Subhash, who is pursuing the case in the high court.

More than 400 children working in the brick kilns of Pedda Kondur and Bommalamaram villages in Yadadri district were rescued as part of the month-long Operation Smile.

Cases of unlawful compulsory labour (IPC 374) have been registered against the 11 brick kilns in owners -Bondula Krishna, Ravala Venkateshwarlu, Manila Palli Manoj Kumar, Malladri Venkatratnam, Kondapanaidu, Madra Rao, Mekala Venkataramaiah, Chala Venkatratnam, Dhadu Prasad, Lakshmi Narayana and Markadalu. None of them have been arrested and the investigation is continuing.