

“Touch wood .....  
Another brick on the wall”



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Dawn – the best part of my day. I love the silence, the peace that envelops my surroundings at this time of the day. It is dark everywhere. There are no street lamps here in Imadol, the outskirts of Kathmandu—the capital city of Nepal. The houses, piles of bricks and the chimneys of the brick kiln stand as sentinels over the area. My surroundings will come to life in a few minutes now—there will be people running all over the place doing their chores, trucks coming for bricks, children crying after getting woken up from a deep sleep, but for us who work here, this is a scene we have come to cherish. Workers will run with loads of bricks on their back and try to get in as many bricks to the kiln as they can. Each brick hauled means more money—the very thing for which 600 of us have left our homes and come to work here. The brick molders will start their work of setting clay in the mold under the light of *tuki*—the kerosene lamp. It is not full moon today otherwise it would have been easier also for moulders to make bricks. For them it is the also same – the more bricks they are able to make the more money they will get. I too will have to start my work, carrying raw bricks to the kiln to be fired. Then I will not be able to spare a single minute for myself.

I am Bhim Kumari Bishowkarma, a 19 year old brick porter from Rolpa, a remote hilly district in the far western part of Nepal. I have been working as a brick porter in Satyanarayan brick kiln since the last five years.

I was married to Om Prasad when I was just 13. Life in Rolpa was difficult. Our district has the dubious distinction of being the place from where the Maoist insurgency started. Harassments from Maoist rebellions and state security forces were getting very difficult to bear and there were hardly any males left in our village of Kareti. Om left for India like many of the villagers, as soon as we married. So, I hardly had a chance to know him. He worked there for six months and for the rest of the time work in a brick kiln in the Kathmandu. Though Rolpa is lush and green, we can survive there only for three months with the food we produce in our land. Many of us who seasonally migrate have hardly any fertile land. In spite of hard work, my husband and others like him did not earn much to maintain a family's subsistence life. After three years of marriage we decided that I too would accompany him to Kathmandu and work alongside him.

The city was a whole new ball game for me. The houses, the roads, shops and the people amazed me. Everything was so big!! I started my “career” in Kathmandu from a BTK (Bull's Trench Kiln) system. I was hired as a loader like my husband and made upto Rs. 100 per day. The work was not at all like what I had imagined. I had thought in my simple “villagers head” that the city was the solution to all problems. Far from it. The glittering lights and fast life hit a difficult and lonely life for us poor people who came here with stars in their eyes and hope in their heart wishing for a better tomorrow. The constant smoke spewing from the BTK bothered me very much. I was coughing like many others who worked with me. All of us were covered with soot. Our skin broke, our eyes watered, our lips chaffed. The work is labourious and tedious. There was no permanency. We did not belong anywhere.

One fine day, some well dressed people came to our kiln. They looked very important. They were talking to our employers. They were surveying a piece of land adjacent to the kiln. After some curiosity we went about doing our jobs. Who had the time to listen to whatever they were saying when every minute meant money for us. At night, while having dinner, my husband mentioned that the important looking people were from something called the VSBK Programme. They were talking about a new technology in brick making. They were telling that it is environment friendly and energy efficient. I did not pay too much attention to him as I hardly understood what he was saying. I had studied till grade three only and such big talks meant nothing to me.

The next day, the same people came along with measuring tapes, papers and pens. This went on for a couple of days. By couple of months, we workers had started talking a lot amongst ourselves. Someone said that the new technology meant that machines would take over our work. Only a handful of the workers would be needed from next season. I started feeling anxious. I could not sleep the whole night. What will happen to us? Where will we go? What would we survive?

One fine day the construction of new *bhatta* (Vertical Shaft Brick Kiln) was finished.

Our employers gathered us together and told us about this technology. The best news was that none of us would have to leave our jobs. The other good news was that this kiln would mean better and longer working months for us.



VSBK in the front, BTK at the back

My husband's hard work was paid when our employer, Mangal Maharjan, chose him to be one of the Fire Masters. A Fire Master's job is a very responsible and skilled one. They have to make sure that the temperature is just correct to burn the clay into perfect bricks. He became skilful after orientations and on-the-job training provided by the VSBK office. Further, he got intensive training for 15 days. *Dai* (brothers; in this case the engineers) from VSBK keep on visiting to show and teach him new things. Working as firemaster in the kiln for two years, now he has become a trainer himself for firemasters of other new kilns. We all feel proud and pride seeing him and his colleagues from rural hills working as a skilled technician. The earning has increased to Rs. 6000 (1 CHF ~ Rs 60) a month.

How time flies. Laxmi, my daughter is three now. She was born in kiln site. Though there were other ladies to help me, I had a very difficult time. The *didi* (social mobiliser) of the VSBK office also gave us training on our women's health during our off days. During that time only I, along with other women, came to know that what I and the rest of the women do is very dangerous. We are putting our lives as well as the lives of our children at risk. We also got to know that we could easily have accessed the nearby health care centre. I was back at work two weeks after the birth of my daughter. We needed more money now. I had to go feed my child every two hours, do other household chores and also work to bring more money home.

It is also a wonder how priorities in life changes once you have a child. It used to be quite tedious for me to carry the bricks and carry Laxmi to and fro to the kiln before. My productivity reduced a lot. That meant less money when we needed more. One day a bone



chilling incident happened in our site. A brick moulder's nine-month old son was playing near where his mother was molding bricks. All of a sudden she heard a cry. When she turned around to look for her son she could not see him. She rushed to the place from where she heard the sound. It was a ditch filled with water from where the molders get clay to mold the bricks, and her son had drowned in there. It was a black day for the 600 workers, the entrepreneurs who owned the factory as well as everyone connected with it. The

parents did get some compensation. But it would not bring their son back. Productivity was hampered for almost a week after that incident. Most of the workers had children and all of us were sick with worry. We almost lost another child some months later. She was almost going

to fall inside the ditch when her father saw her. He pulled her hard by her elbow. She was saved but her elbow got dislocated. The hospital bills amounted to many bills. Our employers did help, but it was a huge setback for the parents. We lived in constant fear that this could happen again to anyone of us.

People from the VSBK office came as a bright ray of sunshine during this bleak period. They spoke about starting a day care centre for children under the age of five. The idea was frowned upon by almost everyone at first. Why would anyone want to keep our children in the care of some stranger for such long hours? And on top of that, we would have to pay Rs 5 per day. It would be better to get someone from our village to look after our children. But the *didi* (Social Mobiliser) from VSBK was very patient with us. She explained the positive points, which were many. We, mothers, went with her on an exposure visit to another childcare centre of carpet workers. We had discussions there. We learnt there that such care centre cannot keep running in the long run if only external aid is provided. We were convinced that we workers have to pay money for it to run by itself. We also learnt that the timing for running the care centre should not be 10 am to 5 pm. We decided that our care centre should be operated according to our need. We got to know people from the VSBK office have convinced our employer and he was also ready to support us to run a childcare centre within the kiln premises. If the fee given by us was not enough to pay the child caretakers, our employer would give the remaining amount from his own pocket. We formed a committee representing parents, workers and employer to manage our childcare centre. When I look back I don't remember that we had such kind of opportunity to discuss our common issues with our employer.



In spite of initial reluctance, the day care is functioning very well now. There are 19 children in the centre and two care takers. I should know, as I am one of the committee members who supervise the smooth running of the centre. Our employer and the workers worked together to construct it. We went ourselves to buy materials for the centre. We selected the caretakers and the VSBK office provided them training on how to take care of children and manage the care centre. We feel proud to pay the caretakers for their services. We pay Rs.

5 per day to send our children. It opens from 7 in the morning. There is a two hour break, which coincides with our break from 12 at noon till 2 pm. They go to the centre again till 4 when our working day is over. Now, I can haul more bricks so the moulders can prepare more raw bricks since we have started sending our children to the care centres. In one hand, we can work without any fear for our children. On the other hand, our employers are also benefiting from our increased productivity. The information about this system has been spread around to catch the eye of workers in other brick kilns also. We hear from all quarters that they too are requesting for such care centre facilities from their employers. I am convinced that our initiation will help to bring change in the lives of 40,000 seasonal migrating workers along with 10,000 children working in almost 200 brick kilns in Kathmandu.

Many of the children amongst the workers are malnourished. The care centre would provide milk for them through a grant given by VSBK. This grant money is also managed by our

committee. The caretakers keep the account and a committee member who can read and write readout the account in our committee and parent's monthly meeting. We are the one to decide what to do and how to use the fund for our children. We are slowly learning how to manage such kind of fund.

For my family and me, we have come a long way. Life in Rolpa is now tougher than before. I wish I could bring my old parents and parents-in-law here to stay with us, but they are too old and do not wish to leave all that is familiar. The brick kiln and its surrounding are home for us. I am sure—Laxmi and children like her will get more exposure and opportunities. I feel happy when she sings new rhymes in her tone.

There is a certain kind of satisfaction in knowing that the beautiful houses in this city might have come from the bricks that I help load, that my husband helped to fire and that my colleagues help mold. This is now our destiny and our calling.

Oh! There is Laxmi calling out to me. I better hurry. I have to cook food, and prepare tiffin for her before the three of us leave for the day. I have to write to my parents some time today to tell them we will not be coming home after the end of the season as there is going to be no “end of the season” this time! We will be working throughout the year.

**“Touch wood for another brick on the wall for the brick workers' life”**



Bhim Kumari Bishwokarma with her daughter Laxmi

