

Hottest Jobs Test Workers in Sweltering India

BY KRISHNA POKHAREL

Scholars have long suspected there is a link between heat and economic development, arguing that hot weather saps energy and productivity by increasing absenteeism and causing more workplace errors.

That is particularly relevant to India where hundreds of millions of people still work outdoors in occupations such as farming, while indoor workers in places like factories rarely have air conditioning.

The International Labor Organization expects work hours lost to heat to equal 80 million full-time jobs by 2030. Much of this loss will occur in India: Since record-keeping began in 1901, the country has experienced 10 of its hottest years in the past 15 years.

The Wall Street Journal spoke to workers in and around New Delhi—where the peak temperature this summer hit 115.7 degrees Fahrenheit—to hear how they cope with ever more ferocious summers.

Naresh Paswan | Occupation: Brick-kiln worker | Age: 23

Naresh Paswan uses a long iron bar to push fuel through dozens of fire holes that feed the kiln. Inside, mud bricks are baking at 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. In the northern Indian plains where the kiln is located, summer temperatures regularly reach 113 degrees, a level that triggers advisories



Brick-kiln worker Naresh Paswan: 'It feels like you are burning but you are still alive.'



Food vendor Poonam Agarwal: 'I feel suffocated and breathless when it is too hot.'

against outdoor work in the afternoon.

But at the brick kilns, it is business as usual, says Paswan. The target for this kiln—which runs 24 hours a day during the roughly four-month

firing season—is to bake 60,000 bricks every day.

The sun's heat compounds the heat from the ovens in the ground. "It feels like you are burning but you are still alive," Paswan said.



Construction worker Rabban Aalam: 'I need to work anytime, in any condition.'



Farmer Rajvir Singh: 'The heat is getting more extreme every year.'

Brick workers often fall ill with fever, nausea and vomiting in the summer months, cutting into their earnings, he said.

In May, when many parts of India experienced a heat wave,

Paswan fell ill. He spent about \$20 of his \$210 in monthly earnings for a doctor's visit and medicines. No one he knows in his line of work has insurance, he said.

"The doctor said I suffered from severe dehydration and anemia," he said. He didn't get paid for the five days he took to recover.

Rajvir Singh | Occupation: Farmer | Age: 69

Standing on the edge of the 5 acres of land he farms outside India's capital, Rajvir Singh says he worries about the future of his sprawling family, which relies on farming and includes his three sons and their children. "The heat is getting more extreme every year. It's harsh both on the crops and the working farmers like us," he said.

More frequently, his crops shrivel before they can be harvested. The heat brings other problems. Farmers use electric pumps to draw more water out of the ground for irrigation, depleting groundwater levels. Farmers must bore 200 feet down to find water, he said, compared with about 80 feet a decade ago.

Singh said he is now picking crops that need less water. After a government irrigation canal next to his farm dried up recently just before this year's rice-sowing season, he decided to sow corn instead.

Rabban Aalam | Occupation: Construction worker | Age: 38

India's construction industry is booming, employing millions in an economy otherwise short of jobs. That includes Rabban Aalam, who loads crushed stones for transport to construction sites on the outskirts of New Delhi.

On a recent scorching afternoon, he stood on top of a truck, leveling out the stones with a shovel.

While climate experts say industries need to adapt working conditions for rising temperatures, in India, labor laws

don't mandate a cutoff temperature for outdoor workers. Authorities periodically issue advisories for firms to limit outdoor work during peak temperatures but these are guidelines rather than rules.

Most firms don't consider heat something they need to protect workers from, arguing that their employees are used to such conditions.

Aalam says the heat and dust of the construction materials often makes him sick, but he tries to keep going. "I get paid for the amount of work I do, so I need to work anytime, in any condition," he said.

The cotton scarf wrapped around his head is his main shield against the heat. "It stops sweat from streaming down to my eyes," he says. "Otherwise, the saltiness makes my eyes smart and I won't be able to see properly."

Poonam Agarwal | Occupation: Street-food vendor | Age: 55

For 20 years, Poonam Agarwal has been cooking and selling plates of yellow-pea curry and fluffy flatbread from her street-side stall next to Old Delhi's iconic mosque, the Jama Masjid.

Every day by 9 a.m., she and her husband arrive on a cycle rickshaw from home with a gas stove and other paraphernalia and work until around 5 p.m. During the hottest days, they set up a canopy umbrella over their stall to shield them from the sun.

Agarwal can't take a break when it is hottest because she earns the most at lunch. Cooking for hours before a burning gas stove on extremely hot days has worsened an existing heart ailment, Agarwal says.

"I feel suffocated and breathless when it is too hot," she says.

To survive, Agarwal says she and her husband gulp down glasses of sweet and salty lemonade from another vendor. But it isn't cheap—each glass costs them 20 cents.

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