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In India's quarries, workers die to make pretty garden tiles

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Many workers in Indian stone quarries, including children, dying of incurable lung disease to produce garden and kitchen tiles

By Rina Chandran

BUDHPURA, India, May 9 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Amid the ancient forts and stunning palaces of India's Rajasthan state is a less alluring sight: hundreds of workers in stone quarries, many dying of silicosis from cutting and polishing the sandstone tiles that adorn gardens and patios here and abroad.

Much of the sandstone used in kitchen counter tops and as cobblestones comes from the state's Kota and Bundi districts, where workers toil under extreme conditions, with hardly any protective gear and for very little money.

About half the state's 2 million mine workers suffer from silicosis or other respiratory diseases, according to labour rights campaigners.

Although there is no comprehensive data, hundreds, possibly thousands, have died of silicosis, an incurable lung disease caused by long-term exposure to silica dust given off in the mining and processing of sandstone and limestone.

Rajasthan's human rights commission last year asked the state government to modernise mining and conduct regular medical tests to contain the disease. Activists say the state must also do more to ensure there are no child workers, whose vulnerable bodies are even more susceptible to silicosis.

"The workers have no safety, no rights. They work like slaves and they get very sick and die," said Madan Vaishnav of ActionAid, which supports a local charity helping workers get tested for silicosis.

"And even if you say, the children have to work because they are poor, this is work that can kill them. These quarries are no place for children," he said.

India is one of the largest producers of raw stone, accounting for more than a quarter of stones mined worldwide.

About a fifth of India's mine workers are children. Many work for more than 10 hours a day in dangerous and filthy conditions.

ALARMING LEVELS

In Bundi district, open-pit mines and quarries dot the arid landscape. Slabs of the popular peach-toned and red-brown stones are piled up, waiting to be loaded on to trucks to export firms to be cut, polished and shipped out, or to homes in the village where women chisel them into smaller pieces for tiles.

In the quarry, where chemicals are used to pulverise the earth to reveal the stone, workers often cut and chisel without goggles, masks or other protective gear, earning as little as 150 rupees (\$2.30) a day.

The industry's working conditions "fall far short" of national or international standards, and there are "alarming levels" of child labour, according to a 2013 UNICEF report.

Child workers make up a fifth of Bundi district's mining workforce of more than 50,000, it said.

"The industry has complex social, economic and political challenges due to the multifaceted supply chain and interwoven network of middlemen, which makes it very difficult to trace the exact source of the stones," the UNICEF report said.

Rajasthan is India's largest sandstone-producing state, and the industry is the only source of livelihood for generations of rural workers trapped in poverty and in debt bondage to the 'maliks', or owners of the quarries, many of them illegal.

Migrant workers from neighbouring Madhya Pradesh and the eastern states of Bihar and Odisha, are also tricked by agents into coming to the quarries with promises of well-paying jobs.

This kind of exploitation is especially common in India's construction sector, particularly in the unregulated areas of brickmaking and stone quarrying, experts say.

In Budhpura village, children as young as six or seven years work in the industry, starting with chiselling cobblestones. Boys start working in the quarries from age 12 or 13, while girls may continue making cobblestones and tiles.

Cobblestone making is paid on a piece-rate basis, so the more a family makes, the higher the income. Children are often forced into work because their fathers die young from silicosis, activists say.

Aravali, a public-private development agency that surveyed mine workers in the state, found that silicosis is caused by inhaling silica dust for 10 years or longer. Until recently, the workers' persistent coughs and weight loss were misdiagnosed as tuberculosis and no compensation paid for the illness.

"We are poor, so our children have to work. The malik anyway doesn't ask how old they are," said Madan Lal, who said he is about 35 years old, although his hollow cheeks and sunken eyes make him look at least a decade older.

"My father also worked in the quarry; he died when I was seven, so I started working. We didn't know about silicosis then. Now I have it, too. Some days I am too sick to work."

DISEASE AND DEATH

Rajasthan is one of the poorest states in the country, with among the lowest literacy rates and a deeply entrenched caste system. Workers in the quarries are mostly from Dalit and other lower-caste and tribal communities.

The sandstone industry has come under attack from environmentalists as well, who say the mining and dumping of chemicals have led to significant land degradation, deforestation and contamination of groundwater.

In Budhpura, a village of about 150 families, at least 70 workers have silicosis including an 18-year old, Vaishnav said. A local charity helps them get tested at a specialist clinic in a nearby town and get a medical certificate to say they have the disease.

The certificate enables workers to apply for the 100,000-rupee medical aid given by the government after activist-led campaigns to secure better worker rights. When a worker dies of silicosis, his family gets 300,000 rupees in compensation.

"The malik doesn't want us to go to the doctor. They don't want us to find out we have silicosis because it is caused by working in the mine," said Lal, who carries a photocopy of his medical certificate folded in his pocket.

"We are worried that our kids will get sick. But what are we to do? We are not educated that we can get other jobs," he said.

After activists drew the attention of foreign buyers to the conditions in the industry, U.K.-based firms including Beltrami, Marshalls and Hardscape agreed with the Ethical Trading Initiative to clean up their supply chains.

Marshalls' Fairstone range ensures no child labour, and that fair wages and safe working conditions are kept in the quarries in India and China it buys from, according to its website.

The Rajasthan government is taking steps to rehabilitate child workers, said Pukhraj Bhatia, chairperson of the state-run Children's Welfare Committee in neighbouring Kota district.

"But poverty is a big issue, and many families see no choice but to make their children work," she said. "It will take time, awareness, and many more welfare programmes to stop child labour."

Until then, there are few options for Lal's children and Neeru, the 16-year old nephew of Vaishna Ramesh, a migrant from Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh.

"I have never been to school, I have always worked with the family in the quarry," he said, while taking a break for lunch, his face and hands smudged with dust.

"This is the only work I know to do."

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