



Children of the stone quarries

Watching 12-year-old Rangamma pound rocks with a 2-kg hammer in a stone quarry, the statistics on child labour leap to life, says [Mari Marcel Thekaekara](#). Anti-Slavery International estimates that roughly 1 million children do extremely dangerous work in India's stone quarries



Rangamma, all of 12 years, trudges through the stark white stone quarry in her bright orange, traditional south Indian pavada skirt and shiny pink blouse, a bucket of unwashed clothes balanced on her hip. She's the archetypal poster girl for an anti-child labour campaign. For the most part, she's left her childhood behind her. In fact, she probably never had one.

We meet her at the one-room crèche and school run by Onsite, a Bangalore-based NGO. The luckier children were playing, studying or reciting verses in the classroom. Rangamma had miles to go. Her playing days were over.

Rangamma's family, all six members, live in a one-room makeshift hovel. The road to her house is difficult to navigate. People have defecated everywhere. There's no electricity, no toilets, very little water. There are no fields, forests or private spaces for the women either.

"My parents came to Bangalore after working for two years close to our native place (Raichur, north Karnataka). I couldn't go to school as I had to look after the younger ones -- two brothers and a sister. My mother had to work, so I had to look after the kids. Now tai (mother) is home, since the last baby recently died (a few weeks ago). So I am working with appa. We wake up at 6 and I wash the dishes while tai cooks lunch. Appa leaves for work at 6. I take his lunch when I join him at 9. I help appa by breaking stones, filling them in the baskets and loading them into the trucks. We get Rs 600 for one lorry tipper. But we pay for the explosives used to blast the rocks. Appa makes Rs 1,000-1,200 a week."

Later, we move to the quarry. Rangamma has finished washing clothes in a little brackish pond. She is now pounding the rocks into little pieces after her father has split the big boulders into two. I will never forget the image of the little girls -- there were a few others -- pounding the rocks with all their might. They

used 2 kg hammers. They were obviously 'professionals'. It is non-stop, unrelenting hard labour normally reserved for convicts on a sentence of rigorous imprisonment. Stone chips fly; the air is heavy with dust.

In the evening, when the large boulders are blasted using dynamite, everyone has to run for their lives. Quite literally. They run out of the valley, ears covered, until they are almost a kilometre away. Everyone must leave. There have been injuries, even deaths, because rocks fly and hit people. It is a seriously dangerous place to be in.

When you read the reports -- academic, bureaucratic ones that are routinely churned out -- the reality doesn't quite hit you. When we followed Rangamma, it was heart wrenching watching the statistics leap to life. This is child labour at its ugliest.

Anti-Slavery International estimates that roughly 1 million children work in India's stone quarries (ILAB report, 2003). According to international and Indian human rights organisations, between 60 and 115 million [1] children form part of India's labour force (government figures claim a mere 15 million) [2, 3]. Of these, an estimated 10-15 million children are bonded labourers [4]; a few million children are illegally employed in mines and stone quarries [5] across India.

It was extremely difficult to find detailed studies on children doing quarry work. Firstly, it is considered a negligible problem because the numbers are small. One or two million is supposedly nothing compared to the vast numbers of children doing agricultural or domestic labour. Secondly, these children are "invisible". They don't exist on paper; only their parents work. So the government does not respond to demands for legislation on their behalf.

The Constitution of India prohibits the employment of children below the age of 14 in factories, mines or hazardous occupations. The National Policy for Children, compiled in 1974, envisages adequate services for children during their period of growth in order to ensure full physical, mental and social development. Child labour deprives children of educational opportunities, obstructs chances for vocational training, and hampers their intellectual development. Mining and quarrying have been categorised as most hazardous occupations for children.

In spite of international conventions and declarations, especially ILO Convention 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labour (prohibiting the use of children in mines and quarries), children are found working in these industries throughout the world.

Pravin Mahajan, founder of Janarth, Aurangabad, an organisation that has been

working with children of migrant labourers for the past eight years, says: "There are hardly any decent studies on children of migrant labour. Indeed it is practically impossible to get any serious national statistics on their numbers, prevalence, whereabouts, etc. It's hard enough to get state government facts about migrant labour. They are not a significant vote bank. The kids are totally ignored in the government statistics." Children working in quarries are even less significant than children of migrant workers.

India's major quarries are spread across the states of Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Almost everywhere they are worked by migrant labour. People forced by poverty, drought, famine or failed crops to take up the hardest possible employment opportunities.

Children aged four years and more work up to 14 hours a day digging, breaking and loading stones, and doing other ore-processing activities, in toxic and hazardous environments, with no safety measures. For example, in granite mines, children are employed to collect kerosene from mine tailings, and handle toxic waste with their bare hands [5].

Children working in quarries experience the constant risk of accidents, injury and chronic health hazards. There are rarely any opportunities for healthcare or education. They are also extremely vulnerable to trafficking and sexual abuse. Escape is hardly ever possible.

The quarry workers, even adults, have blistered hands and injured feet. Rangamma's hands are hardened now. Many children have makeshift bandages -- pieces of rag -- tied around their feet. We ask Rangamma about her health. "When we start we have a lot of blisters. Gradually they go away and the skin on our palms becomes harder," she confides. She's not sorry for herself; she speaks completely matter-of-factly. "The dust gets into our eyes," she says, pointing to several young workers with red, swollen, obviously infected eyes. "We put some medicine. It goes away."

After an hour in the quarry, my throat began to react to the dust particles in the air. It felt parched and dry. I coughed. My voice became hoarse. "When you go home, eat a banana. It'll clear the stone dust from your throat completely," the manager advised. He was right; water didn't help. I had to take his advice to sort out my sore throat. Two hours in the quarry had done me in, I thought. What happens to the children and adults who work there for years?

It takes 10 years off their lives. The official term is 'reduces life expectancy'. They die of silicosis or occupational lung disease

. The studies all talk about adults and the effects of constant dust and pollution on them. I couldn't find anything specifically on the effects on children's health.

By employing child labour, exploitative mine owners and contractors blatantly violate the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 and Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, which specifically state that no child under 14 years shall be employed in a hazardous occupation.

Disturbingly, the government does not acknowledge the high incidence of child labour in mines and quarries, and refuses to address the problem [5]. The enforcement machinery has also been totally ineffective [1,6] in cracking down on the mines. Human rights groups claim that not a single active law enforcement committee exists in India today [1].

Rangamma is not officially a working child. Officially, she does not exist. The contract is with her father; she only helps him. "My appa gets paid. I only help him," she insists. The contractors say they do not employ children. It's not their problem if entire families work together to supplement the family income. So, according to the government records, the number of children "working" in quarries is negligible.

The Indian government is currently supposed to be implementing national child labour programmes in 150 districts. These programmes have largely been restricted to suggestions for implementation of non-formal education under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Child labour continues to be high in all these districts [7].

There is a huge demand for cheap minerals and stones (marble, granite etc) by the construction industry both within India and for export to countries like the UK, US and EU. And to eastern countries like China, Japan and Korea. This makes the situation worse. Nepal is a huge centre for child quarry workers.

In the US, UK and EU, intensive campaigns have been mounted to make people aware that the demand for cheap marble and granite has increased the incidence of children working in quarries. But these campaigns are mostly vilified, with accusations hurled that they are stopping peoples' livelihoods. The pro-child labour lobby, comprising mostly vested interests, claims the children are worse off when they **don't** work because their parents then cannot afford to feed them. This is a myth perpetuated by people who employ children because child labour makes production cheaper and more competitive.

The ILO points out: "The image of youngsters, blackened by coal dust, lugging laden carts up from tunnels deep underground was one of the factors which stirred the ILO

membership to adopt conventions against child labour at the start of the 20th century. Astonishingly, almost a hundred years later, that very image can still be seen in small-scale mines of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even parts of Europe. Although much reduced, the problem persists."

At lunch time, Rangamma walks back to the schoolroom with us, the washed clothes on her hip. The contrast is even more painful. The other kids are playing now, laughing and carefree. The teacher invites her in.

"Do you like this place or home," I ask her. "Home is better. I used to play there often." "What kinds of games?" I probe. "Hopscotch, gilly-danda, catching, and Ayappa Jayappa." Ayappa Jayappa? I had never heard of this game before. The teacher laughs. "It's from this area. All the kids love it. Hey children show these people Ayappa Jayappa," she shouts. The children promptly run to form a circle. Rangamma puts down her washing and joins them. The transformation is startling. Suddenly the child emerges.

The children sit on their haunches in a circle, then begin singing, chanting and moving fast, twisting from side to side, following the song. It is a frenetic twist, their feet and hips move wildly. One by one, they lose their balance and fall off their feet amidst much laughter. Rangamma is one of the best. She moves fast, twirling from side to side effortlessly, laughing as we'd never seen her laugh in the two hours we'd trailed her around the quarry. For the space of 10 minutes she is a child once more; her care-worn, miniature adult identity abandoned.

NGOs and child rights organisations in different parts of the country relentlessly campaign for the rights of a few million children like Rangamma. But it appears to be a losing battle because the nexus of quarry owners, politicians, middlemen, corrupt law enforcers, traffickers and other exploitative forces is extremely well organised and powerful.

The first step is to get the government to acknowledge the existence of these children and stop denying their existence. The rich, both in India and abroad, who demand cheap marble and granite, while pretending the problem of child exploitation doesn't exist, are equally guilty. The lost childhoods of a few million children lie on the floors of their homes, their patios, their palaces.

It seems almost futile to fight the phalanx of powerful vested interests involved in exploiting child labour. But the battle must continue. Until children like Rangamma from Rajasthan to Raichur attain the freedom that is their birthright. Until then, freedom is just another meaningless word...

Fact source: The [End Child Labour in Indian Mines and Quarries](#) Petition to the Government of India was created by Concerned Individuals and written by Ranjana Ghosh

A case study from Rajasthan

By P Madhavan (Mine Labour Protection Campaign) and Dr Sanjay Raj

The authors estimate that out of the 100,000 quarry workers in Bundi district, Rajasthan, roughly 15,000-20,000 are children. There are an estimated 8,000 child labourers involved in making cobbles in Budhpura alone. Moreover, the authors discern an increase in child labour in the Budhpura sandstone quarries. This phenomenon is explained as follows:

- According to quarry workers, low wages of parents (a daily average of Rs 40-50) is one of the main reasons for the increase in child labour.
- Alcoholism among male adults pushes children to supplement their fathers' earnings.
- There is a severe lack of educational facilities, especially to cater to the specific needs of migrant workers. Migrant workers do not live permanently in the area; during the monsoon they return to their villages. This makes it difficult for children to enrol in school. During the quarrying season, migrant workers live close to or even at the quarries, which are 4-5 km away from the main village where most schools are situated.
- Many children of quarry workers are born at and grow up around quarrying sites. These children get used to helping their parents with quarrying activities. They tend to naturally develop a disinterest in studying even if educational opportunities are present.
- Bonded labour remains one of the prime reasons for child labour in Budhpura. When debts exceed the parents' repaying capacity they tend to induct their children into work in order to supplement the family income. If a labourer who has borrowed money for medical services dies, the entire burden falls on his/her children.

References

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2 <http://labour.nic.in/cwl/welcome.html>

3 Anti-Slavery International, Children in Bondage: Slaves of the Subcontinent (London: 1991), p 30

4 <http://www.childright.nl/english/l-ind01.htm>

5 <http://www.indianet.nl/ourminingchildren.pdf>

6 <http://gvnet.com/humantrafficking/India.htm>

7 <http://www.childlabour.tn.gov.in/nclp87.htm>

InfoChange News & Features, December 2008