

# **Child Labour in Jodhpur District**

Rekha Wazir

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## **The sandstone mines**

Jodhpur district, which includes the famous Thar Desert, is an arid region, low in natural resources, and characterised by perennial drought and water shortages. Jodhpur city is the capital of this district. It is a major tourist centre attracting thousands of visitors from India and abroad who come to experience the extraordinary beauty of the city and to venture into the desert. Few, however, would be aware of conditions in the sandstone mines that stretch across an area of nearly 250 square kilometres.

The pink sandstone from this belt is renowned for its aesthetic qualities and for its durability and resistance to heat, cold and water. But, little is ever mentioned about the extremely exploitative and hazardous conditions under which it is mined, the use of child labour and bonded labour, the environmental degradation and noise pollution caused by unsystematic and callous mining, and the considerable health risks to mine workers and their children.

Rajasthan State is rich in mineral resources, second only to Bihar. Mining is a major source of revenue for the state, collected from leases, licenses and royalties. Mining leases are given to individuals and even a cursory review of quarry owners reveals their upper caste and class backgrounds and links to politicians. At the other end, the vast majority of mineworkers belong to scheduled castes and tribes and they tend to be landless or with marginal and unproductive landholdings. In addition, literacy levels among this group are low. Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining why the government can turn a blind eye to the blatantly exploitative conditions prevailing in the mines.

## **Working conditions in the mines**

Mining is an unregulated industry that is not governed by any labour or welfare laws. This is made possible by the fact that leases are given to individuals who extract the sandstone from small plots of land measuring approximately 200 X 100 feet, each employing no more than 5 to 8 workers – men, women and children. The mine owners parcel off their land into small units largely to avoid coming under the purview of industrial legislation. The wages paid and the conditions of work are exploitative in the extreme. The average wage for men is 30-50 Rupees, and for women and children is 15-30 Rupees per day. The mines close down for four months during the rainy season from July – October so employment is available for only 8 months of the year. The average monthly income of a mineworker is estimated to be in the range of Rs. 456 during the working months. The average wage from agriculture is approximately Rs. 825 per month

but this work is available for only a few months in the year and opportunities in this sector have been steadily declining.

Working conditions in the mines are very primitive with no provision for shelter, shade, water, toilets, or medical emergencies. The mine owners do not maintain any records nor is there a register of attendance or compensation for overtime, earned leave, accidents or work related injuries. When accidents occur – and they do quite frequently as the sandstone is extracted manually with the use of primitive tools – it is considered to be a private matter and the worker is not compensated for medical bills nor for lost wages. One attempt at cataloguing mining accidents found that 215 such accidents had taken place in Rajasthan State between January to June 1994 (Mohnot et al 1995). Of these, 130 men, women and children had died and not a single one had been compensated by the mine owners or by the State.

The longer-term health hazards from exposure to sandstone dust are considerable. The prevalence of Tuberculosis and Silicosis and other respiratory diseases is high among mineworkers. A sample survey of mineworkers in Jodhpur district conducted by Mohnot et al (1994) found that 71.6 percent were suffering from respiratory problems. They also note the startling number of young widows of mine workers in some villages!

Quarrying is back breaking and strenuous work and the average working span is between the ages of 16 to 40. After 40, most are too ill or too feeble to work in the mines. Most mineworkers – male and female – use some form of palliative to ease the aches and fatigue they suffer from. Opium, country liquor, tobacco and *zarda* are commonly used, though women appear to stick mainly to opium. Consequently, addiction levels are high. The sample survey mentioned above found that 90 percent of the workers interviewed claimed to consume alcohol daily. It comes as no surprise that the liquor shops located in and around the mines belong to none other than the mine owners!

Conditions of work are such that it becomes impossible for most people to work every day. This is often explained away by referring to the “mentality” of mine workers by virtue of which they tend to first spend what they have earned before going back to earn some more. Similar explanations are given for the high levels of alcoholism and addiction. Justifications abound, including among the mineworkers, for the compelling need to use alcohol and opium to quell the aches and pains that are an occupational hazard. However, this attitude is slowly beginning to change as the younger generation becomes aware of the ills of addiction. As one young worker retorted to a veteran, “You use alcohol but I get myself some pain killers from the health centre”.

Indebtedness is also high and many workers are bonded to their employers on account of their inability to pay off the loan. According to the same survey, as many as 65 percent of workers had taken loans from their employers and many were working to pay off their debts. Mining tends to be a family occupation, passed on from father to son. So is bondage, with sons frequently inheriting the father’s debt. Interestingly, the mine owners give loans and advance payments very readily, but only for unproductive purposes like medical treatment, marriage and funeral expenses, which guarantee that the worker

remains bonded to them. Almost never is a loan given for an activity that could generate an alternative source of income for the mineworker's family.

Mineworkers are not organised or unionised and awareness of labour legislation and workers' rights is very limited. Recently, some attempts have been made to organise them, largely at the initiative of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and concerned citizens. The *Mine Labour Protection Campaign (MLPC)* one such organisation that has been set up with the assistance of The School of Desert Sciences – a Jodhpur based NGO. It has 300 members, of whom 80 are women. The *Sangathan* is at present mediating in disputes between workers and quarry owners and bargaining for better wages, better working conditions and compensation for workplace injury.

### **Child labour in the mines**

Frequently, whole families work together in the mines. The women and children do the most unskilled tasks of clearing rubble and are paid lower wages. Children start working around the age of 10/12 – before that they are just not strong enough to carry heavy loads. They work as helpers at first, removing scrap and rubble, and gradually learn the tasks of making holes, and breaking and removing big slabs and rocks. There are no mechanisms for training them in what are considered the more skilled and better-paid tasks like handling the pneumatic drill and breaking slabs. The only method of picking up skills is through observation and practice.

Many women bring their infant children with them to the work site if they have no other childcare arrangement. I was told that it is not uncommon for mothers to give their babies opium to keep them quiet while they are working. Thus addiction starts early and becomes a way of life. Children also get socialised into the working culture at an early age and by the time they are old enough to start working they are ready to make the transition.

It was impossible to get an accurate account of the number of children working in the mines but some estimates put the figure at 15 percent of the total mining work force in Rajasthan State (Mohnot et al 1995). Many of these children are between the ages of 10-12 and receive a meagre 10-15 Rupees per day. Both boys and girls work in the mines, but more boys as girls are usually kept at home to take over domestic chores like cooking, fetching water and firewood and to look after the younger siblings. Boys over 3 will be found loitering around the village till they reach the age where they can start working in the mines.