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Scandal of the quarry children

By Ros Snowdon Deputy City Editor

In the average Indian quarry 20 per cent of the workforce is made up of child labour, some as young as six. We expose the shocking truth behind the cheap sandstone being exported to the UK and find out what one Yorkshire company is doing about it.

EVER wondered why your lovely new Yorkstone-style patio was so cheap?

Every year two million square metres of sandstone is exported from India to the UK. The main mining area is in Rajasthan, where on average, one in every five workers is a child.

These children, who range from 6 to 16, have no education, healthcare or safe drinking water and many don't even have a roof over their head.

They have to work in terrible conditions carrying heavy loads, wielding sledge-hammers and operating jack-hammers, all without basic safety gear such as shoes, gloves and dust masks.

Many of the people working in the quarries are migrant labourers who scrape an income among the derelict heaps of sandstone spoil, living in makeshift shelters without even the most basic facilities.

They tend to come from the poorest rural communities and will work in the quarries for 8-9 months a year, returning to their native region in the rainy season.

They are vulnerable to many hazardous diseases. Dusty environmental conditions mean that tuberculosis is becoming widespread and in the case of diseases such as lung cancer, death is inevitable because of inadequate medical facilities.

A lack of health awareness is contributing to the rapid spread of syphilis, while poor hygiene and lack of sanitation mean that malaria is becoming a major cause of death.

A recent report on sandstone quarrying in Budhpura, written by academics from the [India Committee of the Netherlands](#), revealed that many quarries were using dangerous working conditions, corrupt trading practices and disastrous environmental management. The report said that children often start work long before they reach the age of 14 and are asked to perform highly dangerous tasks.

Sandstone from Rajasthan makes up 10 per cent of the UK market for decorative paving. It is popular in Britain because the colouring is very close to Yorkstone, one of the most popular paving stones in the UK.

The problem is that sources of Yorkstone are drying up. People who want the yellow Yorkstone look either



Many children in India are forced into working in terrible conditions in quarries

have to buy it from dwindling resources, use reclaimed stone or buy an imitation from India.

The Indian stone is on sale in Britain for as little as £12 per square metre. People would expect to pay around £50 per square metre for genuine Yorkstone, yet they don't question why they are getting such a bargain.

Huddersfield-based Marshalls claims to be the only company in the landscaping industry to be taking proactive steps to do something to solve the problem.

It is a member of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), an alliance of companies, trade unions and non-profit organisations that aims to promote respect for the rights of workers worldwide.

Marshalls has adopted the ETI code at Stoneshippers India, its sole supplier in the region. The ETI code states that child labour should not be used, no-one should be forced to work, working conditions should be safe and healthy, wages should be enough to live on and workers should be treated equally.

While Marshalls is satisfied that Stoneshippers India is working within the ETI code, it says that one supplier alone cannot change the working practices of centuries.

Marshalls' group marketing director Chris Harrop has been out to Rajasthan to witness first hand the terrible working and living conditions in the illegal quarries.

"I was dismayed by some of the practices. Marshalls has done a lot to make sure our house is in order, but that's not enough when the next quarry is using child labour and terrible health and safety practices.

"We can't just ignore it and we can't butt in. This is an issue for the Indian government and an issue for the people buying the stone. People should be asking themselves why the stone is so cheap." Marshalls is also funding the work of Hadoti Hast Shlip Sansthan, an organisation helping to transform the lives of desperately poor migrant workers in some of the most remote rural areas of India.

Hadoti helps migrant workers to implement sustainable development programmes in the mining region of Rajasthan.

Its first priority is providing medical aid through a mobile clinic offering doctors, medicines and equipment, including kits for the treatment of TB.

Health check-up camps are also being set up, with a GP and nursing staff permanently appointed to help treat diseases prevalent in the area, plus other annual epidemics.

Lack of childbirth facilities in these areas means that infant and maternal mortality rates are very high, so the check-up camps will also provide gynaecologists and child specialists to offer essential care. The second major priority for Marshalls' funding of Hadoti is the financial security of migrant labourers.

With match-funding from the Indian Government, Marshalls is paying labourers' social security insurance and aims to cover 1000 migrant workers by the end of 2007. A premium of just 200 rupees per labourer per year will provide a payout of 35,000 to 75,000 rupees in the case of a disabling or fatal accident, providing a financial lifeline to the family of a labourer who could no longer work.

This funding is not for workers at Stoneshippers India, Marshall's sole supplier, as they already receive insurance as part of their pay deal. It is for other migrant labourers in the region who are paid on a daily basis by unscrupulous quarry owners, earning barely enough to live on, let alone save for their family's security. Many of these workers earn between 70 and 90 rupees a day, less than £1.

Hadoti is now working to identify labourers who will benefit from the insurance.

In addition to delivering basics such as clean drinking water, medical facilities, shelters and nurseries, Hadoti aims to make education universal for children and encourage more girls into education. It also focuses on training, employment and development plans for women, whose support and involvement is crucial for any initiative to have real impact in the local community.

In the longer term, it is helping rural people to implement sustainable development programmes by providing rural technology, bank credit and support for micro-enterprises.

The worrying issue is that Marshalls is the only company in the hard landscaping industry to belong to the Ethical Trading Initiative.

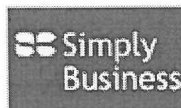
Having seen the harrowing sights first hand, Harrop says he has one plea to make to the British public. "Before you buy stone, please ask your supplier three questions: Where does the stone come from? Was child labour involved? And can you prove it?"

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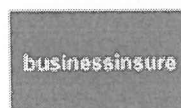
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