

# International

## India



**Working to survive**  
 Child labour laws are routinely ignored in the rush for profits  
 Main photograph: Desmond Boyland/Reuters

# Between a rock and a hard place - how UK patios rely on child labour

**Huge sandstone quarries are fuelling landscaping boom on the cheap**

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In the blazing morning sun Naresh swings a hammer on to a square grey sandstone slab, his features focused on chipping away the rock until it is the length of his feet. Around the boy are crates of blocks, which are graded by texture and shape before being tied up into neat bundles.

What is harvested in this Indian quarry, in the heart of the largest sandstone reserve in the world, ends up laid on gardens in Britain.

Naresh wears no gloves, his feet are clad only in flip flops and his face is coated with a fine dust. The 12-year-old earns 70 rupees (82p) a day, less than 11p an hour, for 100 "gitti", about a square metre of paving stones that will cost £35 when sold for patios and driveways in Britain. He says that as long as he is paid, what the stones are used for and where they end up are not his concern. He works to survive. "My father is sick, my mother is dead. I do not want to go to school," he said in between thwacks of his hammer.

The child is part of a migrant workforce, drawn in by a sandstone rush in which more than 400,000 tonnes of rock will be mined in the next 12 months from the arid flatlands of the western Indian state of Rajasthan.

The supply may be in the sub-continent, but the demand is generated 5,000 miles away in the builders' yards and garden centres of Britain, where the rise of "landscape makeovers" has all but exhausted the paving stones traditionally mined from the Pennines.

Five years ago builders' merchants in Britain scoured the planet for rock

whose colours matched the elusive York stone craved by garden-lovers in Britain. The closest match was the grey and beige sandstones from Rajasthan.

The result is a quarrying boom. Sandstone is desert India's version of oil, a mineral wealth just below the sands of Rajasthan that can be cut and mined cheaply and sold abroad for fat profits.

### Illegal

The industry employs half a million people. More than a fifth are children who scuttle around mounds of rock in illegal mines with little more than a hammer and chisel. A host of international treaties and domestic laws prohibit child labour in India, but the authorities rarely enforce them.

The landscape in this part of the country is man-made. The rock has been scooped out leaving either veins of precious stone to be excavated by hand or hillock-sized slag heaps to be picked over by men, women and children.

Despite the flood of foreign money into the industry, the way Rajasthan stone is mined has changed little. Mines that have been emptied of their wealth are left to collect rainwater and rubbish.

Most of the work is still family-based, lacking the machines, tools and safety

**'My father is sick, my mother is dead. I have to work. I do not want to go to school.'**

Naresh, aged 12

**'Child labour is a form of slavery which is allowed to exist because there is a lack of political will'**

Kailash Satyarthi

measures found in the west. Experts say one death a day is not unusual in the mining business.

In another quarry, 35-year-old Kanta lifts heavy rocks while her six-year-old son sits on top of a pile of finished stone blocks keeping an eye on his 12-month-old brother. "My husband works [in a nearby mine]. I work here. Where will the children go? My eldest can play with the youngest here," she said.

The families come from tribal communities, who say traditional farming does not pay enough. The site foreman, who does not give his name, claims his workers will not wear the boots and gloves handed out by the mine owners. "They tell us it is too hot to work with these things," he said.

Workers have to pay to secure a job, which some experts say binds the workers to an employer. Kanta had to pay 2,000 rupees for her place in the quarry.

Last year a report to the Dutch parliament found problems relating to "bonded labour, child labour, hazardous and unfair working conditions and a series of environmental issues such as land degradation. [The] global natural stone trade has not yet taken up this challenge in any serious way".

There is also a growing awareness of the effect on global warming of shipping sandstone to the UK. Research shows that British reconstituted concrete has just half the carbon footprint of imported natural stone from India.

These findings are seeping into the buying public's mind. One of Britain's biggest building materials companies, Marshalls, says it became alarmed last year about the scale

of the labour abuses uncovered by an internal audit. The company, which last year imported 2 million square metres of decorative paving from India, now buys only from one supplier in Rajasthan, which it has forced to submit to regular inspections and spend £350,000 mechanising production.

### Paying the price

82

The daily wage in pence earned by Naresh, 12, for breaking up slabs

100

The number of "gitti" Naresh breaks up in a day, about one square metre

£35

The amount 100 gitti will fetch in a British garden centre

2000

The amount, in rupees, one worker paid to get a job (£23)

2000

The amount, in rupees, many workers earn in a month

400

Thousands of tonnes of rock mined in Rajasthan in a year



of the labour abuses uncovered by an internal audit. The company, which last year imported 2 million square metres of decorative paving from India, now buys only from one supplier in Rajasthan, which it has forced to submit to regular inspections and spend £350,000 mechanising production.

"We were frankly appalled by the scale of the child labour problem in Rajasthan. You could also see people on site without hard hats, no boots. Suppliers did not keep employment records. There were no first aid facilities. It was a mess," said Chris Harrop, Marshalls group marketing director. "We insisted these things were put right because our customers are becoming aware of the ethics surrounding the debate. We even point people who want Indian sandstone to a company that will plant trees to reduce the impact on global warming of importing the stone."

### Pressure

Many Indian organisations say foreign pressure is essential to change mindsets. "Child labour is a form of slavery which is allowed to exist because there is a lack of political will to do anything about it. We hope that like in other industries such as carpet-weaving that foreign buyers will change these practices in India," said Kailash Satyarthi, chairman of Bachpan Bachao Andolan, a group that works to end child labour.

However, many British companies say eradicating child labour is not a simple issue. The British Association of Landscaping Industries (Bali) said it had an "implied" policy on ethics and sustainability but that members had concerns over how far it should go in terms of child labour. Denise Eubanks, head of Bali's press department, said the instant abolition of such practices could replace "one evil [with a] potentially worse evil where children are forced into prostitution and other criminal activity to help support their families".