

Is Indian sandstone morally acceptable?

Have you ever wondered why Indian sandstone is so cheap? It is often quarried at horrific social, economic and environmental cost. Louise Zass-Bangham reveals the issues and explains how we can — and must — change this situation through ethical sourcing

Below right: Damage to the water table can result from quarrying, ultimately leading to desertification.

This is no small problem. Indian stone is expected to account for up to 20 per cent of the UK domestic paving market in the next ten years. There is a lot of money, and misery, at stake.

Indian stone is transported a long way to reach you. Many people are involved in the supply chain. Yet it is cheaper than local stone, straight from the quarry. So what makes this possible?

Understanding the issues

The India Committee of The Netherlands recently investigated the main quarrying region. Workers are paid from 67p to £2 per day; women and children receive around half that. Exploitative wages, no sick pay, no maternity benefit, seasonal work and high levels of bonded (slave) labour means children have to work for family survival.

Up to 20 per cent of workers are children, typically making setts because they have small hands and apply gentle pressure. Setts are made from smaller stones recovered from spoil heaps — the work of the poorest of the poor. Daniela Reale, Save the Children's child labour adviser,

comments: "Quarrying is one of the worst forms of child labour. Any country where this is happening is legally obliged to tackle the issue urgently."

There is little consideration for basic health and safety precautions. Average life expectancy for an Indian quarry worker is just 40-50 years. Housing



is often at the quarry, so families inhale dust day and night. The dust causes silicosis, a condition similar to miners' lung, with the same deadly consequences.

Irresponsible quarrying has devastated the environment, going far below the water table, upsetting water cycles and causing desertification. Spoil is often illegally dumped, damaging habitats. A thick layer of dust covers the landscape, preventing crops from growing and destroying livelihoods. Wildlife is decimated. The carbon footprint of Indian stone is very concerning, but pales against the immediate tragedy in India.

The issues hit home for Chris Harrop, group marketing director of hard landscape producer Marshalls, when he visited India. After inspecting Marshalls' carefully audited facilities and quarries, he was taken to see several illegal quarries, outside Marshalls' supply chain. He was shocked to find children, the same age as his own, making setts. Harrop's images from these illegal quarries illustrate the issues.

So how have we got ourselves into this situation? Judy Behl, managing director of Scenic Blue believes: "If the consumer knew there were issues like child labour, of course they wouldn't choose the product. Most contractors don't know either." Consumer awareness is rising slowly – the BBC recently broadcast special reports on Indian granite worktops – but this is an urgent educational issue.

Turning the industry around

Julia Hawkins, press officer for the Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI) says businesses can make a real difference – particularly if a whole industry acts collectively. In the landscape sector, Marshalls has signed up to the ETI 'base code'. This is a set of nine principles of ethical trading which follow UN International Labour Organisation legislation.

Marshalls has its entire Indian supply chain, from shipper and processing plant back up to the quarries, audited independently to ensure compliance. This is supported with regular visits by its own team to check health and safety procedures.

Hawkins advises stone importers: "The key thing is to visit your suppliers. Find out as much as possible through site inspections, and meeting workers and their representatives. This is not about policing, but about diagnosing and solving problems."

For example, to avoid child labour, Marshalls has larger pieces of stone shipped to its processing



plant for making into setts. Harrop comments: "If you buy setts on the open market, it is 99 per cent likely they have been made by children."

As Greg Skilbeck, managing director of Silverland Stone, warns: "Some merchants will claim to have a quarry but actually don't. If you don't have control over the supplier, that's where the problem starts."

Reale recommends importers work closely with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and communities to tackle root causes. "If child labour is found, the company should support the family to remove the child from work without threatening the family's survival. Social protection packages for families creates a welfare system that allows parents to send children to school." Sadly, corruption can run deep. Harrop advises that "anyone claiming to represent an NGO needs validating, as many are involved only for their own personal gain".

Above: Lack of protective equipment is still a cause for concern in many quarries where wages are low and sick pay non-existent.

"The lack of schools and early-years childcare contributes to the problem", adds Reale. Funding better learning and play facilities encourages school attendance. For example, Marshalls is involved with a local community school project.

Quarries must be checked to ensure they minimise environmental damage. Spoil must be disposed of responsibly, waste water cleaned and dust reduced. Exhausted pits must be fenced-off. No Indian legislation requires restoration but trees can be planted and the land rehabilitated. Responsible importers can help quarry owners take these steps.

The carbon footprint has been calculated by the Building Research Establishment for Marshalls to be 437kg of carbon dioxide per tonne of paving, from quarry to the consumer. As more information becomes available, we will be able to calculate and compare products by square metreage, including materials needed to lay the paving.

Perhaps one day we will see sustainability labelling on products, like nutritional labelling on food (see 'Green labelling', letters, GDJ 57). Sustainability costs could be given as part of the price – for every tonne sold, a percentage goes to community support, environmental projects or carbon offsetting. This is an opportunity for suppliers to innovate.

What can we do?

Firstly, we have a moral responsibility to inform our clients, contractors and colleagues. Secondly, we can source from ethical importers. Ask questions, get details, don't settle for generalisations. Only specify importers that:

- Follow an ethical code of practice such as the ETI base code
- Visit India regularly – both stone merchants and quarries – to check for child labour and safe working conditions
- Have their total supply chain regularly audited
- Work with verified NGOs on community projects
- Take specific steps to care for the environment.

As with any paving product, evaluate alternatives. Consider sustainable drainage, cement substitutes, recycled aggregate, recycled glass sand and so on. Since carbon offsetting only offers slow solutions to an immediate problem, it is vital we reduce our carbon footprint. Minimise paved areas and use minimum thicknesses. Then consider planting trees within the space or talk to your client about budgeting for carbon offsetting.

When someone offers you amazingly cheap Indian stone, be suspicious. If you buy, you are supporting an unscrupulous operator and perpetuating the problem. An Indian family will have paid dearly for every penny of your discount. Walk away. If we buy only ethically sourced stone, the market for stone produced in exploitative conditions will no longer exist. *Louise Zass-Bangham is a garden designer and writer, specialising in sustainable design.*

Website references

Further information can be found at: www.indianet.nl reports 'Budhpura ground zero' and 'From quarry to graveyard', www.ethicaltrade.org, www.ilo.org, www.savethechildren.org.uk, www.bbc.co.uk, www.marshalls.co.uk and www.silverlandstone.co.uk

Right: Young children making sets to supplement their parents' wages.

