

## Helpless, miserable lives in silent valleys

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**Billi Markundi (Sonebhadra):** After the noisy and narrow lanes of Varanasi, the start of this journey was extremely pleasant. Broad and flat roads offered the view of the distant mountains, vast and green agricultural lands, and groups of bamboo. It seemed as if man and nature had made a commitment to maintain the balance. In certain places it seemed that the identities of both were dependent on each other.

It was difficult to think that there could be pollution anywhere close to the area. But the view changed as Roberstgunj neared. I had to change my views. And Billi Markundi was drastically different. Abundant in minerals, this region of Uttar Pradesh houses dolomite, dolostone and limestone mines. Surrounded by Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, Sonebhadra was till 1992 a part of Mirzapur. Now it is a separate district. This area has mineral deposits. About 80 per cent of it is forest area. Both these are invaluable assets for the country.

First, holes are created in huge mountains by blasting them using dynamite. Then using chisels and hammer man makes the holes deeper. When the mountains finally break down, the smaller pieces of stone are loaded into trucks and offloaded into stone crushers.

There are 175 such mines in the five square kilometres area of Billi Markundi. 160 stone crushers are operating there. From six in the morning till dark the powerful machines operate continuously. As a result dust envelops the surrounding far and wide. People, houses and cattle, none can escape this dust. Moreover, the noise generated by the machines can make anyone deaf. These machines grind the bigger stones into smaller pieces, sort out the stones according to their sizes and pile them up together. These piles look like the mountains they had once been part of. These stones are used in construction. Some are used to make (*gitti*). Those that cannot be used for that either are ground to dust in the machines. The dust is then used in road construction. Maybe it is their fate to break off from the mountain and lay down as dust on the ground.

But this five square kilometres area provides direct or indirect livelihood to one lakh people in the region – including mine owners and their staff, truck drivers, and labourers. This area is also important for Uttar Pradesh government. From all the mines in the state, the government gets Rs 300 crores as tax, out of which Rs 212 crores comes from this region alone.

Travelling through rough and uneven and sometimes dangerous terrain when we reached Billi Markundi's crusher area, we were greeted by terrible noise and

harmful dust. The dust covered bushes in the region were looking ugly. On one hand there was helpless nature and on the other hand humans covered in dust. Unaware of the harms of dust and noise pollution, the workers here neither had mask on their faces, gloves and helmets nor ear plugs to protect them from the noise. More dangerous was the fact that most workers were living here with their families. Most of them were from Jharkhand. Their children were also being affected by the pollution. The children were either working with their parents in the mines or were playing among dust and stones. Either ways they were exposed to damaging environs.

The area does not have primary health services and even shaded areas to protect them from sun and rains. They don't have access to clean drinking water or sanitation facilities. Mine officers are also not near the mines and are mostly resting away from the noise and the dust. Getting the land on lease for ten years they just don't bother about the safety of the workers.

Working from six in the morning till six in the evening, when these workers reach their huts, they don't have the energy left to think about themselves. Maybe that is why 28 year old Nirmal Chauhan from Jharkhand is completely satisfied from his life. Working since last eight years in the region, he gets Rs 100 as his daily income. Mine owner Hansraj Agarwal has given him a room to stay. They have a television in the hall for entertainment every evening. They also get sweets on festivals. He laughs and says, "We are satisfied. We have no problems, *sahib*. There is no danger in this work. Every work has dangers. Why should we be afraid of diseases; no one has fallen ill till now. "

24 year old Kishore Kumar Pande is also working in the same mine for the last five years. He also came here from Jharkhand, looking for work. Like Nirmal, he too has no complaints from life. He says, "We eat loads of jaggery and all the dust settles down with the syrup."

Experts say that besides jaggery, the workers here also drink a lot of liquor made from mahua plant (we saw numerous local wine shops in the region) and eat a lot of fish. Liquor, fish and jaggery – packed stomachs and getting drunk are the reason why they are satisfied. There is an English proverb – ignorance is bliss.

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