

## Migration is the reason for mine worker's exploitation

The labour in the mines, chiefly migrants from the neighbouring states of Jharkhand and Bihar seem to be totally ignorant of the fact that even they are entitled to certain basic rights which they are denied at these dolomite mines. As agriculture is not possible on these rocky terrains and there are no industries or factories nearby so these poor men and their families are totally dependent on the mines for employment. Their migrant nature and sheer helplessness makes them vulnerable targets for the mine owners who exploit them to the fullest, even denying them the facility of clean drinking water and safety equipments.

Kulsum Mustafa

Billi Markundi (Sonebhadra): "There is absolutely no problem for us here, whenever we want to work we come here, whenever we do not want to work we just stay back or go back to our village home. Simple, no tension for us, sir," these are the words of 20 year old Harakar, who comes to work on the mines here from the neighbouring state of Jharkhand.

Agreeing to what had been said by Harakar the other labourers standing beside him also nod and laugh along with him. But the laughter only hits the hard exteriors of the mountains in the vicinity and is lost.

We stand at the dolomite mines of the Billi Markundi situated on a radius of five kilometres trying to find out about mine workers life and the nature of their work.

But sadly these workers who toil on these mines daily seems to be unaware of the fact that it is the very migrant nature of existence that is chiefly responsible for their exploitation at the hands of the mine owners. Working in these rocky and highly infertile terrain of one of the most backward districts of the state of Sonebhadra these workers seem to sadly unaware of the fact that because of the lack of permanency here and the fact that they are not bound by rules but free to chose when to work and when to stay at home they are being deprived of some of the basic amenities which should have been their right in the common course of work at any other place as they would be protected under the labour laws. These basic rights for workers include clean drinking water, toilets, set working hours etc. but they even denied these because they are not under any law and their employers are not answerable to anyone.

Farming is not possible on these lands due to poor soil fertility, there are no industries or factories nearby thus the lone source of livelihood for these poor

workers for their survival is to slog it out all day at these mines without as much as a murmur of protest. They seem to be living in the constant fear that even this avenue of earning may be blocked for them so they make no complaints and bear it all in silence.

Coming under the category of migrant labourers these mine workers of Billi Markundi neither have any organization of their own nor any leader who can put forth their grievances to the mine owners without any fear. These workers neither have any health insurance nor do they have any life insurance cover. There are around 30,000 workers working on this mining area and around one lakh people are directly or indirectly connected with this occupation, which include truck drivers, *dhaba* owners, workers etc. Despite this huge number neither any active non-government organization (NGO) has done any sustained work here nor have any welfare schemes been taken up by the government. There are also no schemes of safety, education or health plans implemented in this area.

When we tried to speak to the mine owners about this they shrug off any responsibility by stating that as they fall under the category of migrant labourers they keep coming and going back to the neighbouring state that they come from how it is not possible for them to devise or implement any welfare schemes for these workers. Some of the mine owners in fact expressed their annoyance and talked of their version. They said that these people come here only to earn money and when they have earned enough they just go back home unmindful of the plight of the owners of the mines and whether the work is over or not. They said that as the going and return of these workers is so indecisive often the mines face a grave shortage of workers and if they are not able to arrange for the adequate number of workers then work at their mines suffers greatly.

M B Singh is the manager of five – six mines of dolomite. Armed with a technical diploma Singh has been acting like a bridge between the mine-workers and the owners for the past eight years. Singh told us that these workers are from time to time given instructions and told of the basic safety measures but generally all the efforts go waste as the workers choose to turn a blind ear to these instructions and not pay any heed of implementing them in their daily working pattern.

According to Singh, the workers say that they find the use of safety equipments and instructions an obstacle in their working. That is why they prefer not to use the safety boots, masks, helmet and gloves, provided to them as they find them cumbersome.

In fact senior manager of dolomite, limestone M R Sharma, blamed the labour department for not looking after the welfare of the labourers here by making frequent inspections.

But then we asked whether the mine owners themselves follow the other welfare and environmental friendly measures like the regular usage of the water sprinklers for suppressing the dust from the crushers, covering the crushers so that the noise level is reduced considerably?

To this, another mine owner Manish Sood answered in the affirmative, "Yes of course we do. These water sprinklers are in use on the mines," he said.

But a random survey of the mines showed clearly the fallacy of his statements. While the lines for the water sprinklers had been installed in almost all the mines none of them were in operation. We did not find equipments covering the stone crushers on most of the mines. But Sardar Girmour Singh seems to understand well the pain of these poor workers well. He had risen from the grassroots, as he was a contactor before he became a mine owner. Singh not only he fully understands the problems of these but also sympathizes with their state of affairs fully.

"Every worker that works on my mines I consider a part of my extended family. Keeping this in mind every week when I give them their payments as an elder I also give them instructions on safety, family values etc. I also share with them my experiences of life – some bitter others sweet. Some follow my instructions others do not." He pauses a little and then continues, "but they are not able to establish a lasting relation. You give them everything but still they do not become yours." he stops without completing his sentence.

Maybe this is the main reason why the NGOs have also not come to this corner of Uttar Pradesh to take stock of the life of this floating population of workers.

The government is maintaining a silence because this area of Billi Markundi gives them high revenue. They do not want to create any obstacles in the way of the mine owners. The state government proposal of setting up a Mineral estate here that will mean shifting the crushing zone of Billi Markundi to Chopan has already raised a lot of storm. If at this juncture fresh concerns about the lack of welfare schemes and implementation of workers rights are raised then a lot of problems will be created that the government does not want at this state.

The peak working period in these mines is between the months of April to October. During the working if any accident takes place then the poor worker of these mine has just the option of praying to the God up there and seeking help from their gods on earth – the mine owner.

"These are our Gods, we depend on them only, after all who else do we have to fall back on," asks Akila as she tries in vain to put her one year old son Sanjay under

the shade of the torn umbrella in order to protect him from the burning rays of the sun. The umbrella is the only shade in the vast expanse of unfriendly rock terrain one does not find any other place of shelter nearby for the resting of these workers.

"Do you not feel afraid of bringing such a small child on this hostile place?" we ask him. "Fear from what? This is the place from where we get our bread. Then he is the child of poor parents if he does not play in the dust and gravel where will he play .He will grow up playing in these terrain only," she posed two counter questions.

Her statements while laced with reality also leaked of helplessness. Maybe the First Aid Box, clean drinking water, schools, entertainment do not matter at all in their lives. What matters is ensuring that the family is able to procure work at the mines in order that they can afford to have a meal twice a day. And for these *rotis* of flour they are ready to swallow tons of dust and clay everyday.

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