

# All that glitters is not gold



Abha Duggal and Martin Punaks from Bachpan Bachao Andolan reveal the children risking their lives to put the 'sparkle' into western cosmetics.



Photos of children collecting mica in Jharkhand, India.  
Credit BBA.



In the jungles of Jharkhand the ground literally sparkles. Beneath the thick tropical forests which make a home for some of India's poorest tribal communities, the earth is rich with valuable mica deposits.

Although few people have heard of mica, it is a valuable mineral deposit used as an insulator in electronic goods, and also as the 'secret ingredient' in cosmetic products to give them their shine. Without mica we wouldn't be able to use mobile phones, computers, televisions or toasters, and a night on the town would be less glitzy without shimmering eye shadow and glossy lipstick.

Sanjeev (not his real name) is a 10-year-old boy from the district of Nawada in Jharkhand. "Mica pieces are spread all across the ground so we have to remove the mud and sieve the mica particles" he explains. "We have to walk three to four kilometers deep into the jungle to find mica. It is very dangerous and many times I have been stung by scorpions whilst digging, and I also get cuts and bruises from sharp stones. Nobody in my family is educated therefore we have no other means of earning money."

However, Sanjeev is one of the lucky ones who is now studying at a school run by a social movement called Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA), which means 'Save the Childhood Movement' in Hindi. "I like reading books and would like to become a police officer" Sanjeev says. "Bachpan Bachao Andolan not only helped me get enrolled in school, but they also helped my father get a job so that he could sort out his drinking problem".

Due to the remoteness of Jharkhand and political agitation by violent Maoist insurgents, there is little help available in the form of government or non-government support, and BBA are one of the few agencies working in the area. In villages with little infrastructure or links to the outside world, BBA have found that the majority of local children work with their parents collecting scrap mica from open-cast mines.

With no government schools in the region there are simply no other alternatives. BBA has now recorded the names of over 5,000 children working in the mica mining industry, but they are aware of many thousands more.

The dangers of open-cast mica mining are multiple and in some cases fatal. Scavenging in the rocky ground, child miners risk snake and scorpion bites, whilst digging holes they risk being buried alive by collapsing slag piles, they also regularly suffer from cuts and skin infections and the mica dust can cause respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis, bronchitis, silicosis and asthma.

Furthermore, the longer term effects of child mica mining are gloomy for the whole community in so far as their children are being denied their right in Indian law to an education which could lift them out of the poverty trap and prevent the ongoing cycle of child labour.

BBA's approach in the region to date has been to establish some basic schools, most of which have now been adopted by the government, and to persuade parents to let their children attend the

schools. But these initiatives have a limited effect on child mica mining because BBA are powerless to change the corporate forces that create the demand for mica and fail to effectively monitor their supply chains.

However, in July 2008 things began to change when The Sunday Times linked the supply chains of several international companies – including Tesco and Asda-Walmart, with child mica mining in the region. BBA suddenly found itself at the centre of an international debate about how to tackle the scandal of child labour in the mica industry.

A momentum is now building in the community calling for change for child mica miners. In October 2009 BBA facilitated a conference for mica traders, corporate agents, community leaders and child labourers in the Koderma district of Jharkhand. Delegates openly acknowledged the problem of child labour and agreed that it can only be resolved through a collective effort to ensure children have access to free education. They also agreed that the most likely way of achieving this would be through an adapted version of BBA's 'child friendly village' model which has proved successful at preventing child labour in other parts of India.

A 'child friendly village' is one where all children are removed from work and enrolled in school, a children's village council is elected and given official recognition by the adult village council and civil society groups are supported to maintain a child friendly culture.

The 'child friendly village' model promotes principles of democracy, good governance and gender parity. However, in the mica mining regions the 'child friendly village' model will be adapted to incorporate an economic element involving the regulation of the collection and sale of mica at a grassroots level through economic community groups. Community group members will support each other in the collection of mica and, very importantly, mica agents will buy mica only from a community group as a whole, rather than from individuals.

The agents will deal directly with registered community group leaders who will be responsible, together with group members, for ensuring that they do not use their children to assist them in collecting mica. To provide a further incentive to not use child labour, agents will buy mica at a slightly higher price than they do currently.

The higher sale price of the mica will compensate for any income lost from children not working. Furthermore, the community groups will have a cap on how much mica they are allowed to sell to an agent in one day which will correspond to the number of adult individuals registered as being part of a community group.

The local community in Jharkhand have backed this model and the task now is to ensure that the international companies give their support required to make it work. Making this happen is one of BBA's key aims for 2010.

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A young girl collects mica with her bare hands in Jharkhand, India.