



Spewing silicosis: Gujarat's factories of doom

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At the exact point where the bumpy single road from Alirajpur spreads out to a smooth highway leading to Godhra via Dahod, you leave Madhya Pradesh and enter Gujarat.

For most of the nation and mainstream media, the word Godhra evokes images of a burning train and the subsequent “communal” riots.

However, for migrant workers from Madhya Pradesh, Godhra represents the uglier side of Gujarat's “vibrant” industrial success story.

Godhra, along with neighbouring Balasinore, is the epicentre of the **silicosis-spewing quartz-crushing industry** in Gujarat.

Silica, obtained after crushing quartz stone, is used for manufacturing special steels and cast iron, aluminium alloys, glass, ceramics, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, paper, paint and insecticides among other things.

The deadliest by-product of quartz crushing, however, is **silicosis**, an incurable and irreversible respiratory disease caused by inhaling free crystalline silica.

“The quartz industry in this area started growing in the 1960s,” says Mohan Bhai of Kumar Minerals, one such factory in Godhra.

“Earlier it was really difficult for workers, but now everything is mechanised and the workers have no problems,” he says.

The mechanisation, however, has only occurred in the dumping and crushing of quartz and that too in only some factories. The collection of ground quartz is still done manually, which is the most hazardous part, eventually sealing the fate of thousands of labourers every year, reducing them to the walking dead.

For an outsider, getting inside a quartz-crushing factory is very difficult as the premises are strictly watched. This correspondent had to sneak inside the production area with great difficulty to get a clear view of things. “We never allow outsiders inside our factories,” says a factory manager at Royal Minerals, Balasinore. “Earlier some people with cameras came and then suddenly there started all this talk of some fatal disease called silicosis. It is all nonsense if you ask me,” he says. The production area, i.e., the place where crushed quartz powder is collected and stored in gunny sacks, is where it all happens.

The large concrete room, even with sufficient ventilation, had fine silica dust floating all around, filling up the room with clouds so thick that it was difficult to see another person standing just a few feet away.



None of the factories had any dust control devices installed and the breathing-masks worn by the labourers were made of thin synthetic material that simply cannot protect the workers from the “white powder of death” suspended in the air around them all day.

On entering the production area with the mask on, this correspondent could easily inhale fine crystalline silica.

While experience has taught the native workforce to not work in these factories anymore, labourers from other states, especially Madhya Pradesh, continue to arrive in droves to work in these factories.

In the quartz industry, there are no unions to protect or promote the interests of the workers. That the workers are an unorganised lot only means that the factory owners continue to ignore their concerns.

While a substantial chunk of them are not aware of the risks involved in the job, most confess to not having any other livelihood option.

“Nobody from our village works in these factories anymore. It is certain death and we have tried warning labourers from Madhya Pradesh about it, but they just don't listen,” says Jabir, a taxi driver from Khadgodhra village in Gujarat's Kheda district.

Once they start working, the labourers stay in groups of four in small rooms provided by the factory owners.

“We are allowed to leave the factory campus only once a week and that too when accompanied by somebody from the factory who keeps a watch and doesn't allow us to speak to anyone outside the group,” says Diwan Singh (18), a migrant worker from Madhya Pradesh's Jhabua district.

Silicosis prevalence is much higher among ex-workers than the existing workers. A study published by the Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine in January this year confirms higher morbidity levels in ex-quartz factory workers compared to current workers.

(<http://www.ijoem.com/text.asp?2010/14/3/87/75695>).

This is explained by the “out of job healthy workers effect,” implying that respiratory morbidity among some workers leads them to quit the job leaving only healthy workers behind.

“We take all the required steps prescribed under the law to ensure that all safety requirements in these factories are met,” Dr. Varesh Sinha, Additional Chief Secretary (Labour and Employment) of Gujarat government told *The Hindu*. “As far as our department is concerned, we have not received any such reports of workers contracting silicosis from factories in these areas,” he said.

In its reply to the show cause issued by the The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in November last, the Gujarat government has shrugged off its responsibility, saying the workers belong to the unorganized sector and should be the responsibility of the Employee State Insurance Corporation (ESIC).

“We are going to write back to them because the position they have taken in their reply is wrong and unacceptable,” NHRC member P.C. Sharma told *The Hindu*.



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“We have sent letters to Chief Ministers of all States to take care of workers **affected by silicosis**, but we have not received any replies except from the government of Rajasthan, which has set up a preventive care fund of Rs.25 crore for such workers,” Mr. Sharma said. But Rajasthan's is an example that the “more developed” State of Gujarat does not seem keen to follow. Till that continues, the labourers from Alirajpur, Dhar, Jhabua and other districts of Madhya Pradesh will continue to pay the price for Gujarat's thriving quartz-crushing industry with their lives.