
India's Shameful Child Labor Mining for Sparkle in Beauty and Auto Industries

By Ethel Howley, SSND



Children sorting mica chips in Indian mine

Mica is a wonder mineral. It is shiny, it insulates against electricity and is heat resistant. It is the substance that gives car paint and cosmetic products their nice shiny, pearly effect and is used in many electronic products, cars, and beauty products including hand cream, sun screen, face powder, and tooth paste. Unfortunately, an estimated 20,000 children work in mica mines in two Indian states.

Granite slabs used for countertops are made up of several different minerals, quartz, and in some cases mica. Mica is usually what makes the granite slab look beautiful by giving off a reflective three dimensional appearance that sparkles.

Acting like tiny prisms, mica flakes refract white light into different colors. The automobile industry has adopted mica for car paint, which lets the vehicle take on different shades from different angles. Metallic automotive paint uses small flakes of aluminum to reflect light and this gives the finish shine and sparkle, while the color looks the same from all angles.

The answer to child labor in mica mining will not be found in company boycotts, audits or social projects, however well meaning, but instead in efforts that push recalcitrant governments to act. Attempts to combat child labor can only be limited, so long as companies “remain silent” on governments’ inaction on human rights’ abuses.



Child-Labor Films

In India this is the situation, where 60% of the world’s mica is produced, despite the fact that mining is being banned in one State mica mine. Mining is destroying the state’s nature reserve, but the world’s growing interest in mica-based cosmetics and auto paint means production continues. For many locals it’s their only source of income. Even though there are serious occupational health hazards linked to mica

production, whole families work in the industry, including 3-5-year-old children. Not a month goes by without somebody dying in the mines. Child slave labor is shockingly common here. Forced to work and deprived of education, these kids are left with only one option – to remain stuck forever in this dangerous and underpaid job. While many big cosmetic companies refuse to buy mica directly from illegal mines, they do not question from where the processing plants they shop at get their supplies. They do not investigate or audit the companies in their supply chains. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the mines in this part of India are illegal.

Child Labor in Mica Mines for Cars

Back in the United States, shareholders in corporations within the automobile industry, including School Sisters of Notre Dame, are engaging these company executives in dialogues concerning child labor in these mines. Although the process of change moves slowly, we look forward to the day when the schools will be filled with students and the mines will be empty.

