

Witness

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Living Stone
by
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Photographs & Text

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The crystal clear water of the Piyain River, which flows from India through Bangladesh, is dying a slow death. “Not long ago, the river that flowed through Jaflong was blue. Now it is losing its natural beauty,” says Probal Das, a stone worker, “and uncontrolled stone crushing threatens the health of the local people.”

History in this region is measured in the monsoon rains. The story centers around the hard working community of Jaflong. Jaflong is located at the foot of the beautiful Meghalaya Hills in the northeastern part of Bangladesh. It was once known for its lush green hills, rolling tea gardens, and a mosaic of stones and rocks. Now Jaflong is changing. Its bright blue skies are covered with thick smoke and dust.



The river used to be the most striking asset of Jafong. During monsoons the river currents wash down precious rocks and pebbles. Today it is the hub of the stone-crushing industry but the river is dying, losing its vitality and beauty.

Every day at the crack of dawn, hundreds of little black and grey boats descend into the river. Laborers of all ages clamor about the river with buckets and spades in hand collecting the stones. They dig, pull out the stones, and carry them on their heads to the hundreds

of noisy stone-crushing machines. The stone rush has turned the riverbank into a giant, stinking, clanging labyrinth of cranes, fractured rocks, trucks, gaping craters, dunes, boats and shacks.

More than 10,000 men, women and children work as stone laborers. Hundreds continue to migrate to Jaflong in search of jobs at the stone crushing sites. Uncontrolled and unstoppable stone extracting and crushing is harming the environment; endangering the health of workers, creating sound and air pollution, and shrinking the biodiversity of the region. According to a local farmer, Abul Hossain, "It is impossible to grow crops because the thick clouds of dust are destroying the soil's fertility."





Over the last two years, stone-crushing machines have been imported into the area. Thousands of laborers, the majority of which are women and girls, carry the collected stones to 250 gargantuan

crushing machines that chew and churn out stone chips. These chips are then transported by trucks to house and road-building projects around the country. Approximately 1,000 trucks visit the quarry sites



each day. It adds up to a mechanical roar that turns the sky into a permanent choking cloud of dust.

“The men earn \$3 to \$5 daily, doing a variety of jobs such as loading

trucks and diving into the river to collect stones,” says Kamal Mir, a laborer. “The women are paid less because they are physically weaker and bad bargainers. They don’t make more than \$2 a day.” The industry



prefers hiring women and girls because they can be paid less. Everyone works 10 and 12 hours a day.

The local community is struggling under the cacophonous sounds of labor and machines. These conditions are combined with a complete lack of workplace safety rules, an absence of labor laws, and dismal living conditions that have also created sprawling slums.

Barefooted workers cover their heads with thin, coarse cotton towels. Skin and respiratory problems are common. Women suffer from urinary infections because of standing in the water for long hours. There are a few rickety toilets for women, built with bamboo poles, tarp and jute sacks. The workers live in flimsy, hand-built shanties. Poor sanitation and unsafe drinking water leads to frequent bouts of waterborne diseases.



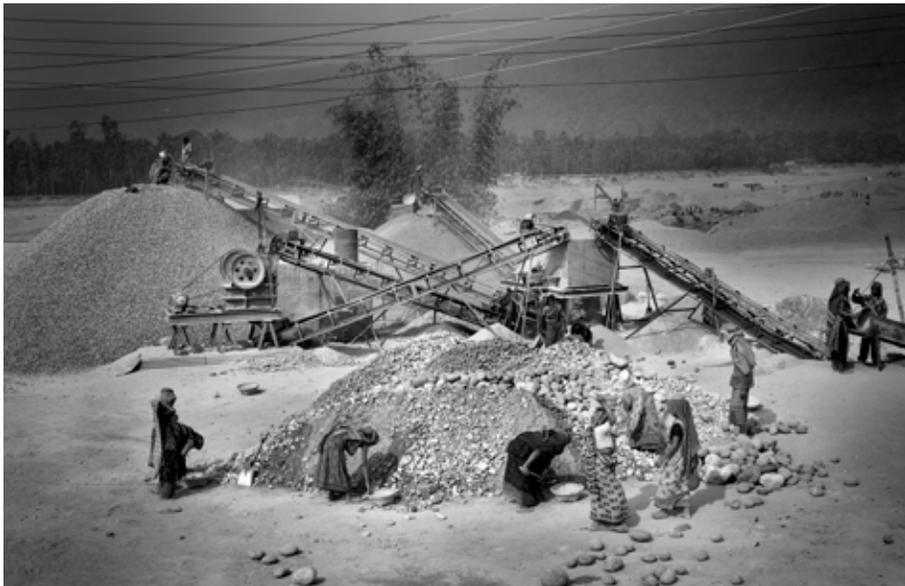


The stone laborers are facing a major crisis of drinking water. An environmental health disaster is unfolding here. Many people are drinking ground water with arsenic concentrations far above the

acceptable levels. The origin of the arsenic pollution is geological. The arsenic is released to groundwater under naturally occurring aquifer conditions. The water supply in Jaflong has been reduced and the



subsoil water level has declined drastically. This has seriously affected the agricultural production and may lead to a major food crisis in this overpopulated area. It also leads to an ecological imbalance with long-term consequences.





Every day the women take their children to the quarry, including babies, where they are exposed to dust and injuries. The women know that men get paid more for the same work, but say that if they

complain the trader says, “you can leave the job, there is no dearth of workers.” No one gets sick leave, overtime, contracts, compensation, or bonuses. The only incentive is survival.



“Two years ago I earned at least \$6 a day, now I earn \$2,” said Rajia Begum, 48. She works seven days a week, 10 hours a day. At noon, Begum stops for a 30-minute lunch break. She squashes a hot green chili and meshes it with boiled rice, mustard oil, salt and eggplant puree. “Rest is a luxury,” she said, raising her voice to be

heard above the constant racket. She packs her plastic Tiffin box and lies on the ground. A few minutes later, she gingerly picks up her wicker basket and hammer and walks away, merging with the sweaty, joyless crowd of stone crushers.

“I can hardly afford food, so, I always try to work a few extra hours,”





said Alya Begum, a mother of two, standing knee-deep in water. A sick day is a hungry day. If she misses work, the contractor will fire her. “Some days when I or my children are ill, I drag myself to work,” she said. Despite the strenuous nature of the job, the workers can afford

to spend only 70 taka (\$1) a day on food.

The children are the most exploited victims. Grueling poverty has forced them to enter the industry early. Many of the children suffer from diarrhea.



Sometimes 15-year-old, Shapna loves the Piyain River. Mostly though, she hates it. She is happy when she rides her brother's boat to cross the river and sad when she has to grudgingly claw through the murky water for stones. She collects at least five baskets a day for 40 cents each. "I have been collecting stones since I was 8," said Shapna, who, like many in rural Bangladesh, uses only her first name. "But why should I work everyday? Sometimes I just get away for a boat ride," said the dust-caked young woman with sun-burnt hair, chapped hands, and bright eyes.

The industry is growing haphazardly, triggering an increase in the use of machines, loss of income for the workers, and a faster loss of natural resources. As Bangladesh moves forward and expands its infrastructure, the demand for stone will continue to grow. Because of this, the government has failed to control the industry. Laborers are denied legal protection and even basic human rights. This will only continue the exploitation of the men, women, and children who labor daily to produce it. With each stone lifted into the crushers, we witnessed the slow, sad, decay of a community.



This project is a production of

VISION PROJECT Inc.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

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Hasan has worked for several newspapers in Bangladesh and a number of international magazines. His photographs have been published in Sunday Times Magazine, American Photo, National Geographic Society, Saudi Aramco World Magazine, Thomson Reuters Foundation, Guardian, Telegraph, The Independent, The New Internationalist, and elsewhere.

He is the winner of numerous awards: All Roads Photography Program of National Geographic Society, Grand Prix winner of “Europe and Asia – Dialogue of Cultures” International Photography Contest, the Humanity Photo Documentary Award organized by UNESCO, the Emerging Photographer in contemporary world by Nikon Asia, and many others. His work has been exhibited in the United States, London, Mexico, Uzbekistan, Australia, Russia, Netherlands, Uzbekistan, Japan, and China.

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