

COVER STORY

THE SLAVE CHILDREN OF MANDSAUR

The slate pencil factories of Mandsaur, in Madhya Pradesh, are torture and death chambers. Children are driven by poverty to do this work, where they will swallow dust which will kill them, where their fingers will be cut to the bone. Few will survive beyond 40. No one will grow old, except the factory owners: who will grow old and rich. NIRMAL MITRA took three days to reach Mandsaur from Calcutta, to file this story. TAPAN DAS took the photographs.

THREE thousand men, women and children, fighting to survive in Madhya Pradesh's sprawling Mandsaur district, live with a cruel paradox: almost all of them will choke and die before reaching 40 of a disease doctors say they cannot cure. And if they don't do this work, they will starve. They know the price they must pay in return for the only jobs they can hope to get—in the district's 85 slate pencil factories and 30-odd mines. The price is virtually mass death.

Slate pencils are made from the mined raw material, plates of shale; the soft stone is cut into small pieces with electrically operated saws, a process which emits dense clouds of a fine, light dust that the workers constantly inhale. The result is silicosis or pneumoconiosis, a lung-disease similar to, but much deadlier than TB. It can kill in as little as six weeks of dry cough and suffocation.

The Madhya Pradesh government, far from ignorant about the truth, has ignored the continuing tragedy. In fact, it has been promoting the trade, with land leases, and aid and advice to at least one slate pencil cooperative. Even when it was publicly declared

that hundreds of middle-aged men were dying, the government action was half-hearted and ineffective: an order was issued to stop work in all factories which had not installed dust-removing machines. Needless to say, the order has gone unheeded. The work goes on, with no sight of the dust-removers; the factory proprietors simply say it is too expensive, and continue killing workers.

For Mandsaur's slate pencil factory and mine workers, all cruelly impoverished villagers who have no land and hardly find any agricultural labour, life is a short, hard and hopeless struggle—against famine, poverty, hunger and the ways of *munshis* (factory proprietors). It is a struggle they have got so used to that they do not protest, or even cry for help; it is a merciless form of subjugation, incredible in this age. Children at the age of 12, and even less, are forced into the fatal work to sustain their dying parents, brothers and sisters, only to learn that they will die soon enough too—of the dust, fatigue and inhumanity. The story has been repeated, year after year, for five decades now.

Nobody can tell for certain how many have choked to death over the years. Many put the figure at 2,000;





Mother is away, at work

some say even more. The truth is that there are few workers who are old enough to have witnessed, and know, the full extent of this 50-year-old tragedy. But there are indicative examples: in the village of Multanpura, which has 60 per cent of the total number of slate pencil factories in Mandsaur, whose population is almost entirely "sustained" by the industry, there is hardly any old person; and almost every third woman is widowed—a pollution widow.

Set on undulating, dusty, grey-stone terrain, the village of Multanpura lies nine kms from Mandsaur town. It has the largest concentration of slate pencil factories in the district, and most of its 2,500 residents are hereditary Muslim pencil factory workers or proprietors. The village is as full of dust, as it is of stories—of humiliation, slavery, sickness and death. One meets case after case of tragedy.

Munna Khan's father Allah Noor died working in a pencil factory, four years ago. Munna now supports his 45-year-old mother. Thirty-year-old Chittu Bagariya is very weak and cannot breathe properly. His mother and father, both of whom worked in pencil factories, have died. "The *munthis*

have been ignoring me for the last two or three months. I am also not being allowed to work," he said, looking pale and downcast. Mohabbat Ali was 34 when he died five years ago. His widow and children live with his parents. Two brothers Mangilalji and Daluramji, both curters, died at 45 and 40 respectively. And so on, endlessly.

Every afternoon Abdul Karim (20) has to make the four-hour bus journey to Indore for a streptomycin injection that he knows will not cure him. "I started work at the age of ten. My father was alive then. He used to sharpen pencils. After working for eight years, he got the dry cough, and started breathing heavily. He was 50 when he died, five months back. I was the only breadwinner left. Now I too am sick. My mother is 50 and has never worked before, but now she is rounding off pencil edges because I will never work any more."

In Mandsaur's district hospital, "silicosis" complaints are treated with special care, and a separate register is being maintained for them. A committee of doctors headed by the hospital's civil surgeon, Dr J. N. Narolia, has completed a study of 600 cases since the beginning of this year, and a report of its findings has been sent to



Parliament. The verdict was clear: there can be no cure for silicosis. The hospital continues to admit patients with silicosis, of course, but all it can do is record the behaviour of the disease.

"There can be no medical solution for this problem, unless the dust particles are prevented from entering the lungs," said Dr Narolia. "I have been to the factories with the labour minister and seen things for myself," he said. Dr Narolia explained how and why silicosis was so dangerous: silicon dust, he said, is very light and flies about, unlike, say, coal dust in a coalmine, which is heavier and falls to the ground. The silicon dust rises and enters the lungs, forming silica patches. This reduces the elasticity of the

lungs, causing fibrosis. As a result the vital capacity of the lungs, that is the oxygen exchange rate, is reduced, since the surface area which absorbs oxygen is less due to the silica patches. The patient does not get oxygen, and develops symptoms of chest diseases, like TB. If the patches are large enough (these can be clearly seen in a chest X-ray), the person suffocates to death. The only treatment possible is not for silicosis, but to check secondary infection—like pneumonia, etc.

On 8 December, Gopal, son of Atma Ram, was admitted in a serious condition to one of the two medical wards. His hospital slip read: "8.12.80: milk diet. Cough, speech, fever. Dyspnoea off and on.—2½ years, more since 4 days. H/O working in slate pencil work

from 10-12 years back. On examination: pt looks ill. Dyspnoea, starting look. Limbus seen, no tremors. 9.12.80: chest flat bilateral. Scattered Rhonchi and crep present...BP 110/90. 1. Silicosis. 2. PTB 3. Thyrotoxicosis." (Illegible portions have been deleted.) The prescription for the first day said: "Try PP4 lacs 9MOO, Cadiphylate I-BM, BC-IBQ, Tab—Diazene penn IHS." For 9 December, it said: "GC same, et al." The patient died at 4.40 pm on 9 December.

Qasim Khan (35), son of Jumma Khan, is on bed number nine in another medical ward. He feels a sharp pain in the left part of his chest. He cannot sleep if he turns to his left on the bed, and usually sleeps prostrate. "I cough so much that I cannot breathe," he said, pulling up his sleeve to show a right forearm lined with swollen veins and perforations made by daily injections. Qasim went on to tell this reporter his brief story, as his wife and child looked on: "I started work from the age of eight, sharpening pencils for eight years and then packing for one and a half years. Then I became a cutter. I had no option; there was no other work and I had to earn a living. I have now filed a case against my employer, Abdul Razak, owner of Subhash Slate Pen, Jeewaganj, Mandasaur, unit number 16 of the Marketing Society." Even after we had spoken to him, and got up to leave, Qasim, convinced that his days are numbered, asked two pitiful questions: "Tell me, is there any cure for this disease? And, when will I get to see the report you are going to write?"

The children of Multanpura are little adults. Hardship and struggle have made them surprisingly mature and farsighted. Idu Khan (17) was working on a saw at Abdul Qadir's Hamid Slate Pencil Works, when this reporter and photographer entered the low-ceilinged room in the guise of curious tourists (a guise that became necessary because it was getting hard to watch and talk to the boys at work without provoking the munshis). Idu has been working for seven years, since he was ten. Asked if he could do no other work, he looked up and whispered: "Kya kare, majboorie hai. My father works on the soil, and I earn about Rs 100 a month. Together we feed my mother, three brothers and five sisters. I am the eldest."

Zaffar Hussain (16), a cutter in the same factory, is a young man with courage. While we were inside, Zaffar winked at us and signalled that he would be waiting outside. Asked about his work, he said he hated it. He was bitter and vehement: "When we protest that this work is dangerous, the s— beat us up. If we tell the police, they get bribed and go away."

THE slate pencil factories and mines are spread over a vast area covering Mandasaur and Malhal, two *rehstis* of the district which include the villages of Multanpura, Piplia Mandi, Bahi Parasnath, Kangheti and Botal.

How children are tortured

'School jana to ghar kya khana?'

SIXTEEN-year-old Zaffar Hussain, lean and bent from hours of cutting work, lives on the fringe of Multanpura with his father, mother, three brothers and five sisters. His father is an agricultural labourer, and he a cutter at Abdul Qadir's Hamid Slate Pencil Works. Zaffar gets paid once in eight days, at the rate of Rs 2 per peti (which is better than what many other factories give). But this is only one side of the story; Zaffar and the other children in his factory are treated very badly; they are beaten up if they complain too much (even while Zaffar spoke to this reporter and photographer behind the cover of a wall and a tree, outside his factory, he looked clearly scared of the consequences; it took him great courage to say, "It's alright, I am not afraid. Please go on.") If by some chance they need money in advance wages, the munshis taunt them and turn them down. Besides, they are made to work long hours—in violation of the law.

Zaffar's day is full of strenuous work, and very little food. He gets up every morning at six, helps get the day started at home; has a cup of tea. Work in the factory starts at eight and the first shift ends at ten, when he returns home for one-and-a-half chappatis and some vegetable. He returns for work again at 12 noon, when the second shift starts. Between five and six pm Zaffar comes home again, for the same measly meal—one-and-a-half chappatis and some vegetable. Occasionally, at least once every week, he has to go back to work after six, for about three hours.

Zaffar hardly has the luxury of any "spare time," except on Fridays, when the factory is closed. Even then, he has to work at home,



on chores and help his father out on the fields.

Talking about the many in his village who have died working like him, in six or seven years, he said: "It is the fate of us poor people to face such hardship." Zaffar is a boy full of enthusiasm. He is cheerful, brave. He wishes he could do a lot of things, but he knows he will never be able to do them. He will die soon. Zaffar envies some children in his village—the munshis' sons for instance, who are getting a proper education. He wishes he could go to school. "Only if I go to school can I try for another job in the city. Otherwise I will have to stick here all my life," he said thoughtfully. But, finally, he realises his helplessness: "School jana to ghar kya khana?"

ganj. The factories look like torture chambers of various dimensions, many of them poorly ventilated, filled with the killer silicon dust. On some walls hang garlanded pictures of Hanuman or Krishna and at least one framed "Om" has the proprietor's nameplate beneath it. Muslim factory owners, of whom there are many, show their godliness by giving a holiday on Friday; on the other six they remain cruel exploiters. A noisy electric or diesel motor operates a series of pulleys, which in turn move a line of rapidly rotating steel saws, fixed to the dust-covered ground. The cutter, normally a young male, squats on his haunches beside a heap of shale plates, which he picks up and runs over the saw, cutting them to the required shape—pencils or rectangles. The discarded pieces are tossed onto another heap.

One cutter works on each saw—of which there are usually five—and to count the pieces cut, there are one or two extra hands, invariably very young children (see cover photograph). A jet of dust shoots off the cutting edge of the saw, at a point barely 14 inches from the cutter's face. Since it is light enough to float about, the dust settles all over the workers' hands, feet and faces, and enters the cutters' ears, noses and mouths. More than anyone else in the room, the cutter continuously swallows the silicon dust, which coats the inside of his lungs and eventually blocks his respiration. Quite naturally, most of those who have died of silicosis have been cutters.

A slate pencil mine is a huge ditch, about 20 feet deep. Men with picks and shovels dig out smooth, flat pieces of shale and load them on the heads of a row of women (young mothers who have left their little children to play in the mud outside the mine) who dump the stones at one spot, to be carried away to the factories in trucks and tractors. The smallest mine could be ten feet by ten feet, and the largest, an irregular winding trench, about 100 yards long. A mine is usually exhausted in three to four months, depending on how large it is, how fast the digging progresses and water content increases.

Although official records show that there are 85 slate pencil factories, many units are not registered under the Factories Act, and operate clandestinely—freely violating labour laws (just like the others, of course). About 4,000 people work in the slate pencil mines and factories. Of them about 1,000 are directly employed in the factories, being paid piece-rates, and the rest, about 3,000, do temporary work in the mines and are indirectly employed in the factories. Indirect employment involves taking work home; this might mean completing an order from a factory, say to round off pencil edges or sharpen them to points (though this has now stopped), or other such piece-rated work. Among the directly employed are mostly children—largely male—between 12 and

15 and adults below 35, and the indirectly and temporarily employed are mostly women.

Mandsaur's slate pencil factories and mines are roughly grouped under two cooperatives, Adarsh Slate Pencil Products Cooperative Society Limited, (called the "society" in local parlance) with 44 units, and the Slate Pencil Products Marketing Cooperative Society Limited (called "marketing"), with 37 units. The latter was superseded by the Madhya Pradesh government two years ago. Besides, there are also a growing number of private units, although official records show only 13 private units.

Units which are grouped under cooperatives are fairly well-protected against transport costs, the hazards of

finding a market, and cutting through official red tape. The cooperative society applies for the shale leases, which are either approved by the district collector or the director of geology and mining, Raipur, of the state's natural resources department. Leases are sold for one year, or three years, against deposits of Rs 500 and Rs 1,500 respectively, and may be renewed indefinitely at any time of the year between January and December, by paying half the initial deposit. The units dig out the shale from chosen plots on the leased land, and cut them first into blocks and then pencils, according to required specifications. To put the finishing touches, like rounding, some women are engaged on a piece-rate basis. The pencils are then packed in

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Qasim Khan on the hospital lawn.

Dangerous dust

THE most difficult health problems for workers come in factories where there is dust. Various sources of dust have to be recognised, and certain basic principles applied either to suppress it or, if that is impossible, at least to control it.

Some dusts damage the lungs directly; others may damage the body in other ways. The danger to health, and the way dust particles behave in the air, depends a great deal on how big they are. In measuring the sizes of dust particles, the unit commonly used is the micron, which is a thousandth of a millimetre. The physical properties of small particles have been studied for many years, but applying some of the knowledge so gained to dust problems is comparatively recent. One of the most important characteristics of small particles is their so-called "terminal velocity." When a solid object falls in the air it does not accelerate indefinitely; eventually it reaches a speed at which the resistance offered by the air equals its weight, and thereafter it falls at a constant speed, that is, its terminal velocity. The terminal velocity of a 100 micron particle of silica, for example, is about 10.3 metres/sec, but it takes a one-micron particle 10,000 times longer, or about 2½ hours, to fall 0.3 metres even in still air. So, suspensions of fine dust in the air have great stability, and in a sense the particles become part of the air itself; they have no appreciable motion of their own.

The air we breathe contains vast numbers of particles, both natural and manmade. We survive in such conditions through the ingenious and remarkably efficient air-conditioning and particle-removal equipment in our respiratory system. These particle-removal devices are good enough to cope with almost all natural and domestic dusts, and to deal with small quantities of some other dusts which, in higher concentrations, would be dangerous to health.

Dusty air entering the nostrils has to pass through a number of hairs which, with the change of direction which occurs at the top of the nose, serves to trap many of the larger particles, and some of the smaller ones. At the same time the air-stream is warmed and humidified to make it more acceptable to the deeper and more delicate parts of the lungs.

The air enters the lungs via the windpipe. This path soon divides into bronchi, which in turn divide and subdivide, each successive branch being of a progressively



smaller diameter. The very smallest branches end in the final air-spaces of the lung, called alveoli or air-sacs, where the gas exchange takes place between the blood and the inhaled air. Oxygen is taken up by the red blood cells and carbon dioxide is given off.

All but the smallest airways of the lungs are lined with a layer of sticky mucus which moves continuously upwards towards the throat. Large particles are unable to negotiate the many bends and corners in the airways and they collide with this sticky lining. This upward-moving mucus escalator serves both to trap and remove these larger particles from the lungs.

Many of the smaller particles, however, particularly those below five microns in diameter, are able to negotiate the maze of branching tubes without touching the sticky sides and they find their way into the air-sacs. Obviously, the walls of these air-sacs must be kept clean so

that gas exchange can take place unhindered. This is where the lungs' second line of defence comes into operation. Within the alveoli there are mobile scavenging cells whose job it is to engulf any foreign particles. They move out of the air-sacs with their load of dust and eventually deposit a great deal of it in the lymph glands at the roots of the lungs.

Once this inhaled dust has been deposited in the respiratory system, one or more of a number of things may happen to it. Soluble particles pass into solution in the lung fluids and become distributed throughout the body. This happens to many non-toxic substances and many poisons, too, such as lead. Particles that are insoluble remain more or less permanently in the lungs or the lymph channels or the glands; they may or may not be harmful. Certain insoluble metals and their compounds appear to be quite inert when deposited in this way, but some other metallic dusts and their compounds produce acute inflammation of the lungs. Some organic dusts are extremely irritant and induce a sensitivity which produces severe reactions whenever the victim is again exposed to the dust. Some dusts are associated with cancer of the lungs; the one best known is asbestos.

The dusts of most interest to industry are the ones that cause pneumoconiosis. This is the general term for the group of lung diseases characterised by fibrous tissue in the lungs. Best known and most important of the pneumoconioses are silicosis and asbestosis. Asbestosis is relatively new, for it did not become established as a separate disease until about 1930. The word silicosis now generally means a disease caused by exposure to dusts consisting of almost pure silica.

Fine particles of free, crystalline silica reaching the air-sacs are, in common with other fine particles, quickly removed by the mobile scavenging cells and deposited in the lymphatic system. Unfortunately these particles of crystalline silica are able to kill the scavenging cells. The dead cells then induce adjacent healthy cells to produce fibres to enclose and isolate the dead ones. Because the fibrous tissue is not as elastic as normal lung tissue, the working of the lungs is impaired, giving rise to breathlessness and a strain on the heart. It is often supposed that such breathlessness is due to physical blocking of airways by large amounts of dust. That never happens. The lungs of people with quite severe dust disease may contain only a few grammes of dust.

By W. A. Bloor, Industrial Hygiene Department, British Ceramic Research Association



Khuda Baksh's factory in Multanpura

boxes of 50 and marketed or sent off to the cooperative offices in Mandasaur—which buy them at fixed rates and then sell them to retailers all over India.

According to Mr R. D. Thapliyal, chairman of the Marketing Society's board of directors (Mr Thapliyal is an officer from the state industries department, recently appointed to advise the superseded society), Mandasaur is the only place in India where slate pencils are produced directly from the mineral raw material, shale. (In other parts of the country, slate pencils are made from a cast or product-mix.) The utilisation of the raw material in the factories is as low as 20 per cent; about 80 per cent of the mineral either goes to waste or is used as filler material in the ceramic industry. Efforts are now on to check whether the shale can be used in the porcelain industry.

The health hazard in slate pencil factories has always existed, though the problem has grown with mechanisation and electrification. The first shale-cutters were hand and bullock-operated; then came the diesel machines; with the construction of the Chambal dam which brought power, electric motors started being used to operate the saws, which meant more dust. In January 1980 the state Assembly passed an amendment to the 1948 Factories Act making it compulsory

for all slate pencil factories to install dust-removing machines. But, a government which could not care less has made little effort to see that this is implemented.

"Twelve units under both societies have already said that they have installed the machines. They have been inspected by the labour department," claims Mr Thapliyal. There is as yet no prototype dust-removing machine, but the G. Sakseria Institute of Science and Technology, Indore, after doing a study of the average proportion of dust in factory, developed a machine. "They should cost anything between Rs 3,000 and Rs 6,000 after being produced on a larger scale. Certain small scale industries are also taking up the work. Lately, some technicians

from the Labour Institute, Bombay came to study the design," said Mr Thapliyal. The slate pencil industry already gets subsidised government aid for some of its schemes but for installing these machines, a special concession will be granted; individual units shall have to bear only ten per cent of the cost, the rest coming from banks. (Under the central investment subsidy, the units already receive a 15 per cent capital subsidy.)

How many of the 12 units who, according to Mr Thapliyal, claimed to have already brought in the machines, are telling the truth remains unknown. But none of the 25-odd factories this reporter visited, in Multanpura, Mandasaur town and Botalganj happened to have them. Asked why dust-removers were not being used, and a government order was being violated, an overseer in Khuda Baksh's factory in Multanpura said, "The machines are being made in Mandasaur by a company called Om. They will be brought after being made." Another common excuse, but one that is not publicly aired, is that the machines are too costly. In fact, the slate pencil industry is based on two brutal assumptions: that human life is cheaper than dust; and the worker's health is unimportant compared to the owner's wealth.

The first assumption is clear even from the arithmetic of piece-rates and profits. Since the cooperatives buy

Zaffar Hussain (16) was bitter and vehement. "When we protest that this work is dangerous, the (owners) beat us up. If we tell the police, they get bribed and go away."

The ones that got away



Mahmooda with son and daughter



Nandubhai and his wife

HOW easy, or hard is it to get out of Mandasaur's slate pencil factories and make a living out of something else?

Nandubhai (26) of Multanpura is married, with three sons and a daughter. His father, Mangilalji (45), a cutter, died on 8 April 1977. "I had put him under a private doctor's care, but it did not help." Nandubhai's uncle, Daluramji, had also died of silicosis at the age of 39. These sudden losses had thrust on him the entire responsibility of sustaining his family. He was already working in Jain Slate Pencil Works, getting about Rs five per day at piece rates. "I had to sharpen, count and pack, but I started as a cutter. I was in school up to class eight. From class nine I had to leave to join Rafiq Slate."

Nandu got his 15-year-old sister married, and finally, 15 months ago, left the slate pencil factory job, because "I could not bear to go on with it any more. I was sure there was something else I could find." It took Nandu a few months to find an alternative source of income. "I started this cloth dhanda (business) six months back. I go to Neemuch, Ratlam and Mandasaur to get the cloth, and sell it here and there."

How did he manage to start the dhanda? "I had friends from school—two men, Bharat Yadav (32) and Hamant Yadav (24)—who helped me a lot. Without their help I would never have succeeded. Now I earn Rs 300 to Rs 400." Nandu went on: "I would not want anyone to do such work in slate pencil factories. But if there are ten peo-

ple waiting to be fed at home, who will feed them?"

Deo Ram (25) worked in Ibrahim's Chand Tara factory for 12 years. It has been two months since he left the job. Now he sells vegetables. His elder brother is married, and he is alone at home with his mother. Deo had to leave the job because of failing health. He foresaw a situation when he would not be given any work in the factory—for that is how they always treat the sick. "I was a cutter. I developed breathing trouble; I have not recovered. Whenever I do heavy exercise, like cycling too long, I get a pain in my chest, and feel exhausted. I cough a lot at night." Has he seen a doctor? "I know it is a dangerous disease, but majboori hai. Everywhere people want bribes. Even doctors. And I do not have the money."

Mushraq (35), who was a cutter at Multanpura, did not get away. He died two years ago. Now his widow Mahmooda (30), who looks much older than her age, manages to feed her little son, Panu (3), and daughter, Munki (16). She gets Rs 3 a day by working in a wheat field from ten in the morning to five in the evening. Sometimes, her brother-in-law, Shamsar (30), an auto-rickshaw driver in Mandasaur, helps out with money and takes the children on free rides: The only fun in their lives. Said Shamsar, "My brother was in an Indore hospital for two months, then in Mandasaur hospital for two to three months and for about 15-20 days in a hospital in Udaipur which is famous for such cases. He died there. We buried him in Mandasaur."

their product at a fixed rate, the best way for individual units to maximise profits is by getting its workers to produce more every day. Thus there are no fixed working hours, and piece-rates are far below even the figures fixed by the Madhya Pradesh government in 1978. Workers are engaged for a range of operations. For digging and loading in mines, they get Rs 3 to 4 per day; cutters get Rs 1.05 to Rs 1.10 per peti (one peti equals 25 boxes, and one box has 50 pencils); sharpeners get 50 to 55 paise per peti (sharpening has now been stopped for lack of market demand); and for rounding edges, the rate is one rupee per 1,000 pieces. Compared to this the 1978 official rate for cutters was Rs 2 per peti!

How much the factory owners profit is evident from a few figures: to produce one peti of pencils the owners have to pay their workers roughly Rs 3.10 and then bear expenses like the cost of packaging, transport and temporary mine labour. But the wholesale price of one peti of blunt white pencils is Rs 22.50 (according to Adarsh's rate-chart), which is much more than the total cost of production. In 1979-80, Adarsh's gross sales were about Rs 16 lakhs (for 90,000 petis), and, according to Mr Thapliyal, the Marketing Society's gross sales are about Rs one crore per year. Of the profits that percolate to the munshis, not even a paise is spent on compensating dead or disabled factory workers, providing medical attention and improving their factories' dusty interiors. In fact, the sick are brutally kicked out of their jobs so that they may die in their huts.

The munshis treat the workers like beasts of burden, to be used and abandoned. There is no place for anyone who has worked too long in a dusty factory—for by then he is weak and breathless, waiting to die. Only young teenagers, healthy boys and girls as yet unaffected by any disease, catch the munshis' eyes. They are forced to replace their parents on the job. To the workers this fate is inescapable; they have no other option but to survive on piece-rates. Agriculture provides only occasional respites, and even so, is hardly ever paying. Work on opium cultivations (Mandasaur is a flourishing opium centre) brings Rs 2 to 4 per day, and, on the wheat fields, about the same amount.

Worse, this year there was a drought. Said 45-year-old Dalu Ram of Multanpura whose 18-year-old son Kanhaiya works as a cutter, "Last year chenna was grown, with good results. This year we grew wheat, but there was no rainfall. Wells which can water ten bighas did not give water for even one bigha. Vajpayeeji (Atal Behari) had pleaded for this area to be declared drought-affected, but this was not done. How can anything change if people are not made to know what is happening here?" This year the whole village of Multanpura is engaged in factory work. The people are slaves of the munshis because they own their only means of sustenance. "Yeh to



Mute reminders of the tragedy

majboorie ki kaam hai," said a surprisingly mature Kanhaiya Ram. "The whole village is dying, finished. Still, we have to work. Who will give us money?" Not one young boy or girl, man or woman in any of the factories this reporter and photographer visited gave the impression of enjoying his or her work or of having come into it willingly. And rarely can they free themselves from the clutches of such an existence.

TALK of unions is nonsensical to Dalu Ram of Multanpura. "When the big seth comes to beat us up, who will save us?" To form a union Dalu Ram says, is to deliberately provoke the *munshis*. Even those who profess to be slate pencil workers' leaders—townsfolk who cannot understand the torture and humiliation a worker is subjected to—have failed to inspire any confidence. The first of them was Radheyshyam Pandit, and then came B. K. Patil of the Congress (I). Said Dalu Ram: "They bring out pamphlets, thinking it will help. Far from helping us, the pamphlets are telling lies. One for instance, said that we earn Rs 25 per day!"

And what have all the governments done to prevent child labour and dust-poisoning? In November 1980 the labour office conducted a child labour

survey in the district's pencil factories to detect all children between 12 and 15. Said Mr H. R. Dwivedi, labour officer, Mandsaur, "Thirty children were found to be in this age group, among whom eight are below 12 and the rest between 12 and 15." If that is correct how does the government explain the fact that almost every worker in the 16-20 age group has been working for the last six or seven years? As for the official ban on work without dust-cleaners, it is now a joke.

Asked why people were forced to work in slate pencil factories, the additional district magistrate Mr B. L. Bhatt replied, "The mobility of indigenous Mohammedan labour is less. For example, in the *bidi*-making industry. The workers do not want to leave home." It did not occur to Mr Bhatt that without money, food, and any hope of finding work to support his dying family, a worker cannot leave home. As for the inhuman treatment of labourers, the ADM brushed off the question: "Those whom you call labourers, they are not labourers in most cases. I am telling you what I have seen. They are actually distant relatives of the owners. This is common among the Mohammedans." Does Mr Bhatt assume that "distant relatives" should be made slaves, even if his assertion is correct? In any case, it was surprising to hear differences

being made on account of religion. Mandsaur is a classic of rich Muslims and Hindus shamelessly exploiting poor Muslims and Hindus.

A most unforgivable fact of life in Mandsaur is the legal and bureaucratic delay in meeting compensation claims. Workers or their families can apply for compensation under the 1924 Workmen's Compensation Rules, either directly to the compensation commissioner, Mrs Laxmi Jain, or through advocates, before the labour court, in Ratlam. The court comes once a week to Mandsaur, and sits every Tuesday in the Mandsaur collectorate building. There are presently 58 cases pending. (25 relating to death, the rest involving disablement). How long it will take to decide them, and pay the claimants off, is anybody's guess. "It is true the process is long-drawn. We are trying, but we cannot do anything effective because of 'procedure'; also, the advocates of the workers themselves delay cases," said Mr H. R. Dwivedi. Naturally, the bureaucrat has always someone else or something else to blame.

The story is one of continued suffering; of enslaved children facing certain death from silicosis. It is a story about children, that will never be told to those children all over the country who are learning their first alphabets with slate pencils.