

Chris Harrops Trip to Bundhi & Kota December 2006

This blog records my recent visit to the Bundi and Kota areas of Rajasthan in India.

Marshalls are a major importer of Indian Natural Sandstone and in recent years have worked hard with our supplier in India Stoneshippers India to improve the sustainability of their operations.

In particular as part of our membership of the ETI, the Ethical Trading Initiative we have audited Stoneshippers India operations on several occasions, resulting with our help in their compliance with the ETI base code in May 2006.

Over the last few years there has been a growing awareness of the issues surrounding the Indian natural stone quarrying industries and the export of paving to the UK and Europe. However the vast majority of production is for Indian consumption.

2 Reports are worth particular note;

Budhpura Ground Zero - which after reading we commissioned our audit company AQR to specifically audit all the source quarries for the presence of child labour – with confirmation that there was none.

And

Quarry to Graveyard - which specifically mentioned the work that Marshalls have done in India (indeed we are the only company in Europe it does mention) but suggested that we should do more to work with NGO's, Non Government Organisations. Tracking down such NGO's has been no small feat and enquiries with the authors of the report has disappointingly brought no response.

This trip had 3 key objectives, the first to check on progress in Stoneshippers India and ensure that standards were maintained post audit, the second to gain a deeper understanding of the issues within the supply chain in India and thirdly to meet with 2 particular NGO's that we have tracked down who are involved in this area and explore where we could have a greater positive impact against our 3 sustainability areas, social, economic and environmental.

Our aim is not to try change the whole Indian Natural Stone industry – clearly that is the role of the NGO's and the Indian Government, but to work to ensuring that the products that we source from India are gained ethically and sustainably.

My trip begins with our arrival at Jaipur Airport at 11.15 am on Monday 4th December, after leaving on the 3rd from Manchester, flying to Amsterdam and then onto Mumbai, changing to the domestic terminal and taking a Go Airways (India's answer to Easy Jet) flight to Jaipur.

Monday 4th December

We are met at the airport by Rajiv Bazaz, the Managing Director and Owner of Stoneshippers India our sole supplier of Indian Natural Sandstone and our driver for the next 3 days, Maveram.

From here and armed with several bottles of water we set out on a 5 hour (250 kms) drive on NH12 to Kota where Stoneshippers India have their quarries and main production facilities.

Driving in India is always an interesting process, with there being only one side of the road – the middle, and all manoeuvres signalled by ferocious use of the horn!

We brake our journey at “the services” in Tonk for a cold drink and a stretch.



Then on into Bundi District stopping at Boondi to look across the valley at the old Palace;



We arrive into the town of Kota at about 16:15 driving past the bus station;



and straight to the main Stoneshippers Manufacturing facilities.

At the main gates we are met by the security guard who asks us to sign in, gives us visitor badges and a copy of the site safety briefing – just like visiting any of our UK facilities. We check the visitor book to see that this is not just for our presence but normal practice and are reassured to see that the book is well used.



We start our tour with a visit to the workers facilities, the rest rooms, the toilets and the changing rooms. All are in excellent condition and are clearly used. Inside the guards hut we check the first aid box and it is full and up to date, with a record of checks being kept on the inside of the door.

From here we inspect the main saw sheds;



And are pleased to see that proper PPE (personal protective equipment) is being used;



For all of the water that is used in the manufacturing process there is a system of filter beds and a recycling system;



We also inspect the processing machines for guarding and safe working practices – all are present.



Further round the site we see the workers packing crates of Setts, all of Marshalls products are sorted by hand for size, colour and quality – we check the completed crates and are pleased to see that all is well. Unlike many other companies we have insisted that Stoneshippers India place packaging between the layers to prevent the stones from rubbing during their journey to the UK.



In the main office we meet with the site manager Mr Sharma who shows us training records for all of the staff covering safe working practices, and emergency / fire procedures. All staff records are in place and there is a very comprehensive site manual, including accident reports which was up to date.

We will be returning to this site tomorrow so we head off to another of Stoneshippers India factories, their new Calibration plant.

Just as we are leaving a delivery of finished product arrives from one of Stoneshippers India masons yards;



Stoneshippers India employs 6 Camels to transport product around their yards, we ask about how the camels are looked after and are assured that they are well cared for.

Whilst talking to the driver the Camel starts to give me warning looks I and retreat to the relative safety behind Rajiv!

The Calibration factory is Stoneshippers India newest facility and is still under construction, this site will ensure that every piece of Marshalls product is calibrated to a consistent thickness to aid installation and represents a significant investment for Stoneshippers India;



The site is a hive of construction activity but I am please to see that the same standards of Health and safety are in place already, with first aid boxes, safety posters and in particular “No child labour” notices already up.



This plant is also equipped with a sophisticated water processing and recycling system to ensure that the waste material from the calibration process is managed carefully and not just allowed to run into the local water course;



The site is a way off being completed and I look forward to being able to inspect the site fully when it is finally completed and fully working. Only then we will be able to see if the quality and health and safety systems are properly in place, but so far so good.

Our last visit of the day is to one of the masons yards;

The first thing I see getting out of the car was a local snake, just to prove that we are in India;



This site receives raw materials from the quarries and turns it into paving;



Splitting the stone in the right places is a skilled job and Stoneshippers has a core of very skilled masons;



The site manager tells me that whilst all the workers are provided with glasses, gloves and boots, the masons will only agree to wear the glasses, stating that they need to feel the stone to be able to work it properly and in the heat the boots are unbearable.

We go into the site office I ask to see the accident book to check if this is causing problems – the accident book is up to date and lists various accidents, mainly slips and falls – something that needs addressing.



Also in the office are the colour masters and size templates to ensure that the paving is colour sorted correctly and that it is dimensionally correct.

Out in the yard the masons are hard at work producing paving;





The cynic in me asks whether the masons are wearing glasses just for our benefit but we are told that they realise that if anything damages their eyesight they will be unable to work and therefore have a personal incentive to wear them. These workers have a valuable skill that is in demand in this region.

The final areas we look at are the changing rooms;



And the rest area;



It is now dusk and the mosquito's are out in force, I will certainly be taking the anti-malaria tablets !

We travel to the other side of Kota to our hotel, the Umed Bhawan Palace. The hotel was built in 1905 and was designed to look very much older!



After a quick shower and meal in the deserted restaurant (it seems we are the only guests in the hotel) its off to bed ready for an early start in the morning.

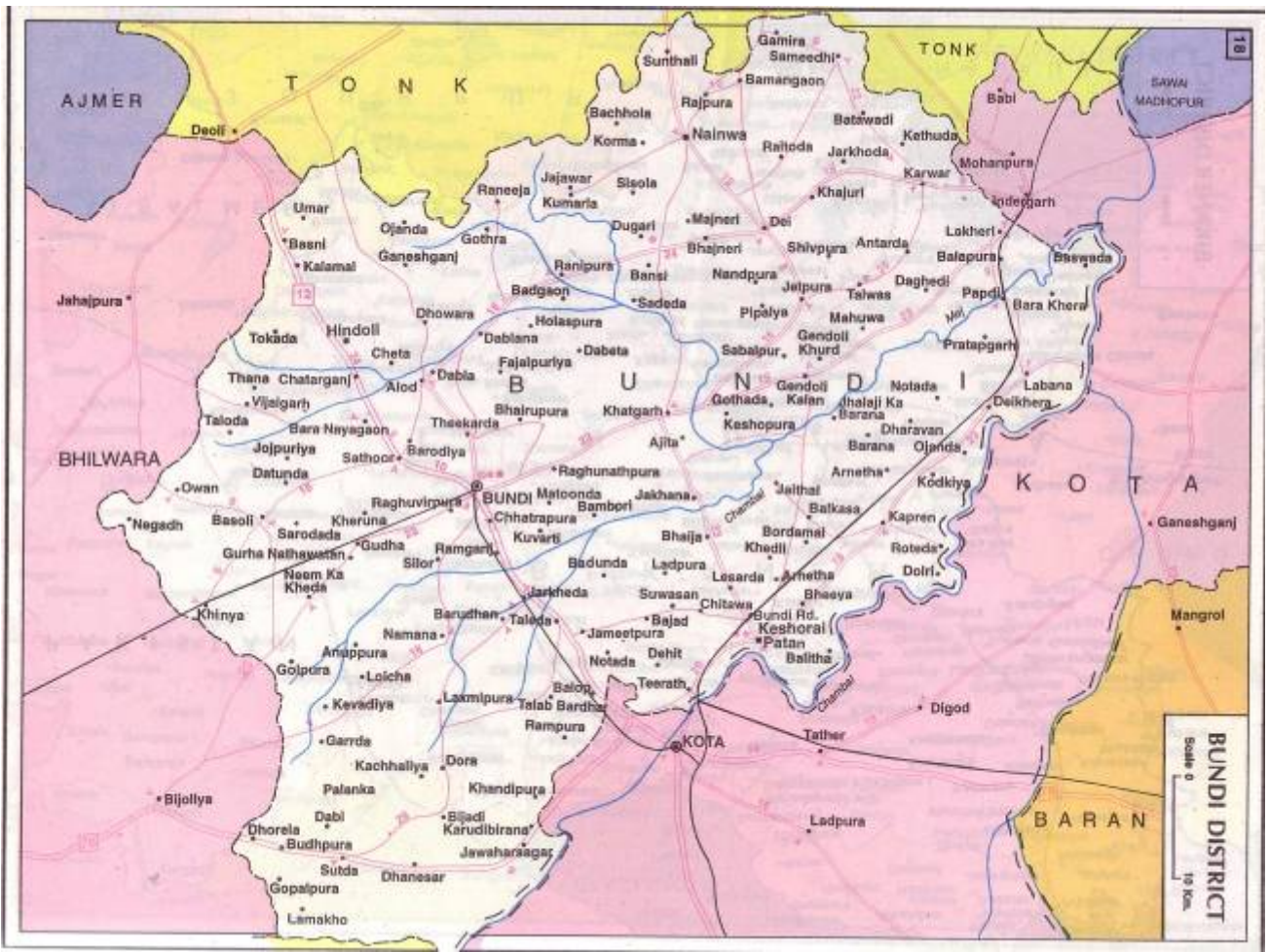
Tuesday 6th December 2006

We leave the Hotel at 07:30 and as we are leaving I see the source of much of the screaming and screeching that we heard throughout the night as well as the explosions at 12:30, 02:15, 04:30 and a special wake up call at 06:30;



The grounds of the hotel are home to several families of monkeys who apparently are engaged in a constant war for territory. To discourage them from raiding the kitchens and waste bins the hotel night staff set off fireworks to scare them off (it doesn't work !).

Our trip today is to the north of Kota into Bundi District where most of the sandstone quarries are located;



AJMER

T O N K

TONK

18

SAWA MADHUPUR

BHILWARA

BUNDI

K O T A

BARAN

BUNDI DISTRICT
Scale 0 10 Km.



Our route for the day is;

Kota – Jarkheda – Namara – Kevadiya – Garrda – Bijoliya – Golpura – Budhpura – Dabi – Rajpura – Dabi – Dhanesar – Jawaharsagar – Kota – Mandana – Ravtha – Kota.

As we leave the Kota district and enter Bundi the landscape changes quite dramatically, hundreds of years of stone quarrying have left their mark on the land;



We arrive at Stoneshippers India's own quarry at 08:30;



Unlike the majority of quarries in the area Stoneshippers India has invested in machinery to both extract and transport the stone;



The site records show the details of all workers, no one under 18 is employed but I am concerned that there are women undertaking heavy manual labour removing spoil. I am informed that this is normal practice and that the spoil removers are essentially families of migrant workers that are paid by the tractor load of spoil removed.

Stoneshippers India have a process in place to try to ensure that no children are working as part of these family gangs, but we are informed that there are no childcare facilities and so the parents must look after their children whilst they work.

On this site there are safe areas for them but the issue of migrant workers from other states is one that is a very serious issue, for whilst they are able to earn 3x more money doing this work (about the same as a lorry driver) because they are from out of state their children are not eligible to attend the local schools and none of them are eligible for medical services. It seems that each Indian state only looks after people from their own state.

This is something that I want to raise with the NGO's we plan to meet later.

From here we are taken to a nearby illegal quarry run we are told by an ex-bandit.

The difference in the 2 sites is quite marked, the first thing we see when entering causes me great concern – these 2 look far too young and are wearing no protective equipment at all;





These two are clearly bare footed, with no gloves, no ear protection and no eye protection. The person on the right is also clearly under 18.

At this point the owner arrives, not too happy to see us



and apparently not wanting me to take his photo (I was told that fortunately he did not have his gun with him at the time);



As we leave we look over into another part of the site where another migrant family is hard at work;



The person with the sledge hammer is clearly under 18, as his the other child who was resting in the shade;



After leaving the quarry I want to see the local school to see what facilities are available to the children of the quarry workers.

We stop in the village of Garrda, the school is closed today as there is a government health screening in the school grounds;



The most striking of the many posters are the ones that are telling people that “Girl” children are equal to “Boy” children.

The school itself has two buildings this is the main one;



The school has 133 pupils across all age groups, roll is taken both by age / year group and by caste split boys and girls;



The classrooms are very basic;



The staffroom was equally basic and lacking in materials;



Literacy in Bundi is 55.08% compared to the state of Rajasthan at 61.03% and I am told that the schools suffer from poor attendance of the children AND teachers.

However the work on the blackboards did show quite a high standard of mathematics, this one showing long multiplication, and another calculus;



Looking at the school playground I see little incentive for children to play here and in the far corner you can see the toilet facilities;



Leaving Garrda we head towards the neighbouring state of Bhilwara to the town of Bijoliya.

The road to Bijoliya takes us out of the quarrying area and shows us what the area looked like before the quarry's were opened;



Behind the wall is government protected land, but given the existence and illegal quarries and the remoteness of the areas I have concerns about whether they can be effectively protected.

Many of the roads in this area are little more than tracks;



Turning without warning back into asphalt. In an indication of the rural nature of this area and in fact of 69.5% of the Indian population are classified as rural dwellers came just before we entered the town;



These women having to walk miles to collect firewood.

Just outside the town we come across several areas where paving was being made;



These site are producing paving destined for export – as we saw from the crates;



In addition to there being children working on these sites



I was also shocked to see so many women carrying out very hard manual work;



From here we drove towards Budhpura, past many played out quarries;



As we approach Budhpura there are many yards / fields full of sandstone setts;



Taking photographs here was not appreciated.

Just before we enter the town we are met by a Mr Siddique a local journalist for the Bhaskar newspaper who was previously involved in trying to set up a co-op for local paving producers in conjunction with the MLPC, the Mine Labour Protection Campaign who are active in West Rajasthan.

On previous visits Marshalls representatives had agreed to buy product from the co-op, however it appears that with the exception of a very small yard nothing ever came of the co-op.

With Mr Siddique was another man who claimed at first to represent an NGO concerned with quarrying issues, however he was unable to either name himself or the NGO. Clearly anyone claiming to represent an NGO needs validating, as many are involved only for their own personal gain.

Stoneshippers India do not currently buy from area, and we leave with a promise again to source materials from the co-op if it can establish itself on a proper footing and demonstrate that it is operating in the best interests of its members.

We reach the centre of Budhpura;



A town that has suffered greatly as the quarries have run out of new seams and one that is now based around re-working the spoil heads to make setts.

We turn off the road and into a huge area of spoil heaps to see for ourselves the effect that quarrying has had.

However the first site that meets us is particularly upsetting;



This girl clearly making setts cannot be much older than 10.

As we drive on we see the effect on the water table of the quarrying;



Our track takes us over several huge spoil heaps to again see clear evidence of children working to produce paving and setts;



These spoil heaps seem to cover an endless area with some quarries still active and as you can see from this picture people washing their clothes in the quarry lake, indicating that they are living amongst the spoil heaps;



Back on the road again we head towards Dabi past several huge working quarries;



I get quite excited whilst being told that at the next site the owner has replanted the spoil heaps created from his quarry, but only until I was told it had been 5 years ago and only to secure rights to open a further quarry. The owner had done nothing since but the trees were flourishing.



This however does prove that the spoil heaps can be replanted and some of the environmental damage repaired.

Outside the village of Dabi we turn down a dirt track towards an even smaller village called Rajpura where some of the areas brown sandstone is quarried;



Here again there is evidence of children working, this boy, under the watchful eye of his mother is making paving;



We are told by a proud owner that much of the paving from this site is exported to the UK.

Other children were arriving as we were there;



Here I am in the picture with these boys who were enjoying a joke about these strange westerners in a quarry!

Next stop is the “New” Stone Mundi or market where all of the stone is sold for the local market. The site is vast. Taking us 10 minutes just to drive round the edges. The “old” stone mundi is still being used and this shows just how much of the stone produced here is used in India.

Over 95% of the stone produced in this area is for local use, the exporters have simply tapped into the existing industry.

From here we head back into Kota for a late lunch (2pm) at the Stone shippers company flat, where 4 of the site supervisors live. Whilst looking very appetising the morning had taken my appetite away.

After lunch we headed south towards the ICD, the Inland Container Depot where stone for export can be loaded onto rail transporters.

Stoneshippers India have taken the decision to load all of their containers in their own yards, to

At the ICD in Ravtha we are told not to take photographs as this is a customs bonded area.

We now head back into Kota itself to visit more Stoneshippers India's yards. Here again we are met at the gate by a security guard, we sign in and receive visitors badges.

The site has restrooms, toilets, and changing areas for the employees and again we check the first aid cabinet and records.



This site is used for stock sorting (for colour, size and thickness consistency) and we check this as well.



It is now time for our first meeting with one of the NGO's we have scheduled;

Mrs Joshi of the Hadoti Hast Shlip Sansthan organisation.

The HHSS is a voluntary organisation established in 1991 working for the socio economic development and upliftment for labourer of various unorganised sectors - which in this case covers the migrant workers in the quarrying areas.

We have a very interesting and instructive meeting with Mrs Joshi how explains in detail the work of here organisation its successes and programs which are particularly concerned with ensuring that educational and health services are available to the migrant workers. In response to many of our questions we arrange with Mrs Joshi to return the next day.

It is now well past 7 pm and when we leave the HHSS offices we provide an excellent meal to hundred of local mosquitoes despite Boot's best insect repellent.

Back at our hotel once we have showered and applied bite cream we reflect on the days visits and the fact that whilst Stoneshippers India practices are significantly better than their competitors more could and should be done.

Stoneshippers India produce all of their Marshalls paving in house from block and slabs to ensure that there is no child labour involved in the production.

Mr Bazaz tells us that his supervisors have themselves come up with a plan to put play equipment into the playground at the School in Garrda as they believe that this will encourage more children to attend. This is an interesting perspective as to western eyes books and educational equipment would have been our first priority, but living here they understand that the priority is to get the children into school in the first place.

The hotel is the venue for a (very large by our standards) wedding tonight and upwards of 1,500 guests are expected in the hotel grounds in specially constructed tents. The actual ceremony is due to take place at 1.30am in one of the hotel courtyards – by which time I hope to be sound asleep.

Wednesday 7th December 2006

I am up early today and take a walk round the grounds of the hotel and round the roof areas, the contrast to the trip of the previous day is stark and unsettling. Non of the clocks in the hotel work, all apparently having stopped at 10.05 – a case for Scully and Mulder



When we meet for breakfast we try to count how many monkey bangers were set off during the night – including a triple bomber at about 3 am.

Clearly the remaining food from the wedding proved too much temptation for the monkeys, but they are still here;



And according to the waiters at breakfast the wedding planned for that evening is due to have 5,000 guests.

We spend the morning with the Stoneshippers India managers and supervisors looking at the working practices across their remaining sites – I am particularly interested in how well the excellent practices of the main factory are transferred to other satellite sites. Whilst the basics have been applied across the sites there is still some work to do.

I am very conscious whilst talking to the supervisors that the culture and working practices in India are very different to those in the UK, and what we take for granted can be very new ways of working in India.

However the areas of non negotiation for us, child labour, the provision of PPE and adequate wages, are all met in every site.

Non of the migrant workers on the Stoneshippers India sites look under age, but we agree that every migrant / casual worker that works in any Stoneshippers India site will either prove their age via voting card (the only certain way we are told) or be refused employment.

At 12.30 we head back to see Mrs Joshi at the HHSS where we are provided with a very comprehensive pack on information about their work, their programs, their finances and a proposal for greater involvement in the specific problems that migrant workers in the quarry sector face.

The PowerPoint presentation of our discussions and background on the HHSS is available for download here ([click here](#))

After leaving Mrs Joshi we start our 5 hour journey to Jaipur where we are due to meet representatives of Aravali, an umbrella organisation working in Rajasthan.

www.aravali.org.in



We have a very good meeting with two representatives of Aravali who's main areas of concern in this area were that most of the mines in Bundi were illegal, there was very little implementation of the India Governments Mining Act and that the health problems associated with working in the quarries were being ignored.

At the end of the meeting we agreed that Aravali would send us a proposal for a study into all the issues surrounding the quarrying and production of Natural Sandstone, including designing a program to address those issues and how they would operationalise it, with the national, regional and local government and other NGO's.

We then left to board our plane back to Mumbai, with Mr Bazaz coming with us. During our journey we also agreed that Stoneshippers would investigate how to commission a report into the potential work that could be done to address the environmental impact of the quarrying.

At 2.30 am I boarded my plane in Mumbai to head back to the UK via Amsterdam.

Postscript

Firstly in keeping with our households policy of being carbon neutral I have offset the carbon created by this trip.

Before going to India I set myself 3 objectives;

1. To check on progress in Stoneshippers and ensure that standards were maintained post ETI audits,
2. To gain a deeper understanding of the issues within the supply chain in India
3. Thirdly to meet with 2 NGO's involved in this area and explore where we could have a greater positive impact against our 3 sustainability areas, social, economic and environmental.

I was very pleased to see that Stoneshippers India are continuing to make excellent progress and to continue to meet the ETI base code that Marshalls has committed to ensuring exists in its supply chain. There are many areas that I have discussed with Stoneshippers India to improve things further but must recognised that they are far ahead of any other producer either for export or local use.

The issues that the industry in India face go far deeper than any one producer can address, in order for progress to be made it is essential that all consumers of produce sourced in India are aware of the impact that their product choices make and that they can change things by their buying decisions. Only when the producers of un-ethical and environmentally damaging product are denied a market will they change or that product is substituted by product produced in a more sustainable manner.

It is clear that great economic benefit is being gained by the Indian industry exporting product to the UK and the rest of Europe, but this much be balanced with the other 2 essential strands of sustainability, social and environmental.

The 2 NGO's I met are deepened my understanding of the issues and barriers to change in the area, which span national, regional as well as local and individual issues.

I will be visiting the area again in February 2007 to again check on continued compliance to the ETI based code by Stoneshippers India * and to explore further areas that Marshalls could or should be involved in with the NGO's.

* This is in addition to the independent third party audits that we are committed to undertaking.

Chris Harrop
December 2006