

Silicosis – The Killer Occupational Disease of Workers

Silicosis is an incurable respiratory disease caused by inhaling silica dust, and today it is prevalent and wide spread occupational disease killing many workers in the unorganized sector. This menace is prevalent among mines, besides among workers engaged in several other occupations such as stone crushers, quartz mining and processing, foundries, sand blasting, ceramic industries, gem-cutting polishing, slate and pencil industries, glass manufacturing and construction workers.

With the boom in construction sector this killer-occupational disease is widely spreading among construction workers, who are unorganized labourers working under contractors without any remedy, recourse, preventive safety arrangements and even any compensation in the cases of deaths due to silicosis.

As far back as 1924 itself, the workmen's compensation act, 1924, has found 'Silicosis' as an occupational disease to be compensated, as "...any employment involving exposure to in the inhalation of dust containing silica" vide its schedule III of part C. Further acts such as Mines Act 1952, Iron Ore Mines and Manganese Ore Mines Welfare Cess Act, 1946, a clear and categorical statutory provision was made for funds, cess, compensation, preventive arrangements to protect the workers from affecting with the dangerous silicosis disease.

However, with the adoption of imperialist neo-liberal economic policies and their implementation in our country, the methods of out-sourcing and contractulisation of works, these statutory laws are being effectually defeated and violated by the contractors and the principle employers are conveniently avoiding and evading their responsibilities and legal liabilities with the connivance of the government and law implementing authorities and agencies.

The established trade union centres have long went in to a deep slumber abdicating their purpose and are continuing with formal and ritualistic programmes to maintain their status quo.

But some independent organizations like Peoples Rights and social Action Research, New Delhi, and some individual lawyers like Mr.M.C.Mehata have taken up the cause of the workers at the mechanical stone crushers at Lalkuan of New Delhi, and are fighting for the rights of these stone-crusher sector workers of Lalkuan area. According to the estimation of the above organization; at least 4,000 migrant manual labourers have died in the last 13 years from Silicosis.

In 1988 a study done by AIIMS doctors revealed that at 6 persons out of 18 were suffering in Lalkuan from silicosis. Again in 2001, a study of PRASAR, which surveyed 146 people found 83 people suffering from silicosis and other respiratory diseases like T.B. and silico-tuberculosis. Many silicosis victims in Lalkuan area died due to improper treatment and unavailability of medicines.

In the Rajasthan state according to rough estimates there are around 25 lakhs of workers engaged in mining operations. Since 2009-10, 57 silicosis deaths have been reported from Rajasthan state and 891 cases detected. These workers are among the poorest of the poor.

Though the Rajasthan state Human Rights Commission has asked the state government to launch a state-wide study on silicosis 15 months back, the state government had not heeded the recommendation and totally neglected.

Again vide its report dated April 5 (2016) the state SHRC has to ask the Rajasthan government to take a fresh look at the Mines act; 1952, to contain the alarming spread of occupational disease silicosis and other diseases and effectively deal with violators. It also said "it should be made compulsory for mine owners to use modern technology for extraction of sand stone and other dimensional stones. It also asked that the mine workers be given with 'identity cards' which should be a bio-metric one containing the record of employment and medical history of the holder".

But one can not expect that the government will ever heed these recommendations, which are not mandatory. The victims can not expect any hope of protection from the established trade-union centres either.

Such is the pitiable condition in to which the manual-labouring workers in mining activities in the organized sector, depending on the charity (support) of NGOs and non-mandatory statutory organizations for the protection of their existence.