Mica, the dark side of beauty.

Praguni Kumar

Have you ever wondered how your highlighter or eyeshadow can be blinding? Have you ever really taken a minute to actually see what it’s made of ? And even if you did, did you ever wonder where the ingredients came from ?

Although makeup can make us feel beautiful, it has quite a dark side and children are the hidden cost behind the making of your favourite day - to - day products. You may ask, how are they manufactured ? By mining Mica. Mica can be found in almost all of your makeup products ranging from eyeshadows to highlights to anything with that particular shimmer. Mining the mineral involves dangerous digging of vertical shafts of one to two metres wide and around 15 metres deep with the fear in mind that a rock could fall on them at any moment, extracting and then sorting the mica. Once extracted and sorted, the commodity is exported primarily to China. From there it finds its way into Western products.

Mica scavenging in Eastern India is destroying lives and the environment. Illegal mica mining not only causes serious health hazards among the child workers but also leads to massive deforestation and loss of wildlife. Exploitative child labour, death by suffocation in mining shafts, heads splitting open due to a rocks falling on their head, severe health hazards such as tuberculosis for the impoverished workers who have nothing else to turn to for a living are issues that need more immediate attention. As much as you might love your sparkly beaming product, would you really want a death attached to it?

Despite the fact that East India is quite rich in mica and other minerals, it has the highest poverty rates in the entire country.

The families from whom the mica is purchased do not receive a decent wage to get their children educated or to have proper standards of living. Globally, the mica industry is worth over half a billion dollars while the families receive hardly $5 dollars per month. The children are made to hand pick mica one by one and for that they are making less than a quarter a day. It’s been estimated almost 20,000 children are working all across the region in small, claustrophobic mines.

But it’s also painfully clear that these children have no alternative to feed their families. Despite multiple reported cases of lung failure and death due to tunnels collapsing, there’s an estimate of 10 out of 20 deaths each month, the children and their families are left with no options. The unregulated nature of mica has opened the door to dangerous work conditions and predatory pricing. Only if they were provided with ₹30-40 for a kg (56 cents) they would have been able to escape the never ending cycle of poverty.

If you think about it, there’s absolutely no transparency about the supply chains involved in making these beauty products. James Charles, Jeffree Star, Fenty Beauty etc all contain mica, even your drugstore makeup brands. If you check the description tag they say “cruelty free” but is cruelty free only limited to animals or does it extend to children too?