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HD The grind and grief behind the glitter

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Mica, a key ingredient for the **billion**-dollar beauty industry, is mined by children in an impoverished region of India. Ben Doherty and Sarah Whyte report.

Mohammed Salim Ansari is worried he is in trouble. Crouched, alone and barefoot and carrying a sharpened stick he uses to hack at the wall of earth in front of him, he thinks he we have come to take him from his family.

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Frightened, almost in tears, he is mollified when we explain we only want to talk about his work, and he quietly goes back to his crude **mining** in a small hollow of rock.

The low hills of Jharkhand shimmer in the afternoon sun, but all that glisters is not **gold**.

The precious mineral lode of these mountains, in India's poor, remote east, do not portend riches for those who mine it. Instead, the mica that brings sparkle to the world means only grinding work, and an unremitting, unprofitable obligation to do more of it.

Mica is a mineral coveted for centuries for its unique lustre and its myriad uses in modern products now make it a valuable commodity.

It is mica that gives make-up like eye shadow, nail polish, lipstick and concealer their shimmer. Mica gives automotive paints their shine and is used in building materials and as an insulator in electronic chips. It is used in lasers and radar.

This impoverished district in eastern India has the largest known mica deposits in the world. The mineral here is easily accessible, high quality and in demand from around the world, but the industry here is little better than a black market, depending on an unskilled workforce, forced into working for lower and lower prices. Profits are made off the backs of children.

Salim, 12, has been **mining** for a year, he says, helping out his father who is further down the hill.

He insists he goes to school every day and only mines when he comes home. We found him soon after 1pm and, when we asked him what his teacher's name was, he didn't know.

Others in the village say that he in enrolled in school, but doesn't go. He mines every day.

"I don't like this," he says, as he hacks at the rock. The cracked plastic tray he fills with mica flakes can hold a kilogram. He will fill it 10 times today.

Each kilogram earns him 5 rupees (about 8¢). Depending on its quality, mica on the international market can fetch anywhere from several dollars a kilogram to more than $1000, but the 50 rupees (83¢) Salim earns each day is a vital adjunct to his parents' income.

They need him to work he says, "to help earn money".

The work is hard and dangerous. Children working risk snake and scorpion bites, and the hollowed-out caves they mine in collapse often. They also suffer cuts and skin infections, as well as respiratory illnesses, such as bronchitis, silicosis and asthma. But however difficult and dangerous, Salim's work, officially at least, doesn't exist.

India officially produces about 15,000 tonnes of crude and scrap mica a year, according to the government's Bureau of Mines. It has a few hundred tonnes stockpiled. Yet it exported more than 130,000 tonnes - more than eight times the official figure - in 2011-12, more than half of it to **China**.

"At present, the majority of mica **mining** and trade is illegal," India's industry secretary, A.P. Singh, drily noted of the massive discrepancy.

Most of India's exports of high-quality mica flakes come from illegal mines such as this one and much of it from the work of child miners like Salim. But where the truckloads of mica are going and for what purpose are kept hidden by the suppliers, who are at the start of a complex and clandestine supply chain.

In Australia and around the world, mica remains one of key ingredients in the make-up and nail polish women put on their faces and fingers every day. It's an ingredient used not only to add shine to the make-up, but to absorb excess oils and give it a consistent texture. The mineral can also be called Glimmer, Kaliglimmer, Muskovit, or may be named only by the code CI 77019.

Australian cosmetics brand Napoleon Perdis lists mica as a primary ingredient on its packages in many of its products, including its "prismatic eye shadow", "DeVine goddess lipstick" and "Auto Pilot" skin primer, priced between $30 and $52.

After months of emails from Fairfax, the **company** would not disclose where the mica used in its products was sourced from or who the suppliers were.

"As we are a private **company**, we wouldn't be able to provide our actual supplier's name," a Napoleon Perdis spokeswoman said.

Estee Lauder Companies, which owns brands MAC, Clinique, Bobbi Brown and Estee Lauder, said it sourced less than 10 per cent of the mica from India, but was working with a local community organisation to eliminate child labour.

"Since 2006, we have partnered with local [non-governmental organisation] Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) to promote access to education as an approach to work towards the elimination of child labour in mica-sourcing communities," a spokeswoman said.

Heritage Brands, which owns brands Australis, Innoxa and Revlon, says it audits and insists on accreditation for all suppliers and does not source any products from India, but the **company** could not provide specific information regarding the "source of raw materials used by all our suppliers".

"We do not believe that any of our products are associated with child labour," a spokeswoman said.

Meanwhile, make-up giant L'Oreal Group, whose brands include Lancome, L'Oreal, Redken, Maybelline, The Body Shop and Yves Saint Laurent, did not reply to the questions sent by Fairfax.

Mica used in cosmetics has been linked to child labour in the past. In 2009, German pharmaceutical and chemicals **company**Merck KGaA, which supplies mica to cosmetic brands around the world, was accused of using children to mine mica in India.

Since 2011, the pharmaceutical giant says it has implemented a "mica-tracking system" and a "two-pronged approach" to ensure it has full control of its supply chain.

"We are able to guarantee that no children are involved in mica sourcing and processing," spokesman Gerhard Lerch said.

In Jharkhand, Salim's village sells its mica to small traders, who consolidate several villages' worth of work to sell to bigger suppliers, who sell it to exporters and, usually through **China**, to the world's cosmetic houses, paint companies and electronic firms.

That child labour is used to mine mica in India is known. The commissioner with the Indian government's National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights, Yogesh Dube, recently visited Jharkhand and said: "Child labour and trafficking are major issues in Jharkhand and it is high time that people understood."

Two decades ago, in the face of environmental concerns and in an effort to regulate the mica industry, the government shut mines across the state, but the closures simply drove child labour further, literally and metaphorically, underground.

The organisation of the industry is intentionally opaque, said Kailash Satyarthi, founder of child rights organisation BBA. Those who work at the mine face are unaware of where their product ends up, and those who buy the mica are wilfully blind about where it comes from.

"It is like a mafia. There is a blackmarket for this. There are subcontractors in each village who rely on the children's labour, but the miners . . . are the third, fourth, fifth layer in the supply chain, and the subcontractors and the suppliers don't tell them where it goes."

BBA has helped create 'child-friendly villages' in Jharkhand, where children do not work. It has established schools for primary-school-aged children in those villages and provided bicycles to older students so they can travel to nearby secondary schools.

In communities where children are expected to be at school, rather than at work, attendance rates are more than 90 per cent.

Industry efforts at reform, however, have been ineffective. India has strong child labour laws, which prohibit anyone under 18 working in **mining**, but enforcement is lax.

"The situation is not easy in that area," Satyarthi said. "The Naxalites [a Maoist rebel army] control the jungle, police are regularly killed, and government officials cannot go there, so there is no control." The day before our visit to this mine site, two police were ambushed on a nearby road. They were decapitated and their heads left on the road as a warning.

In the nearby town of Jhumri Telaiya, whole streets are dedicated to the mica trade, most of it blackmarket. Men sit before sacks full of mica flakes for export.

Trader Rajesh Jain said government closures of legal mines had forced people to work illegally. "They are dependent on it and they are very poor. Without this, they would have no income at all."

Because Jharkhand had the best-quality mica, the demand was strong, he said.

We were briefly allowed access to a legal mine, but armed security guards quickly surrounded us and insisted we leave. Some women were at lunch, sitting under a tree. Two of them looked young, about 10 or 11, but we were not allowed to speak to them or take photographs.

Beside a nearby road, 12-year-old Renu and 10-year-old Khushbu, migrant girls from the same village, were crouched in a pit, filling plastic tubs like Salim's. The sun was fierce and the entire landscape shimmered with piles of mica waiting for **sale**.

Renu said the work was hard. It cut her hands and made her sick. "I don't like it, but my family are here."

Talo Singh, a relative, said both girls had been working in this mine for about four months. "Our family migrated here for work, so there is nothing wrong if our entire family works for our livelihood," he said by way of explanation as to why the girls did not attend school.

Khushbu, looking even younger than her age as she expertly gathered the shiny flakes, said she knew about make-up, and that the mica she mined each day ended up as decoration on the faces of women overseas.

"It is used in powder for ladies."

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