

# **Hearts of Darkness**

## **Workers in India, including children, will die young grinding gemstones for Valentine's Day**

By Charles Kernaghan

### **How could something as beautiful as a gemstone cause so much suffering and death?**

Not a single newspaper article, not a word, let alone a movie, has been written in the United States to expose a massacre going on now in India, where over 2,000 men, women and children have died a miserable death polishing gemstones for export to the U.S.

This Valentine's Day, heart-shaped agate and rose quartz jewelry and ornaments made in India are likely to sell very well. In India, the workers who grind and shape these gemstones will continue to breathe in the fine silica dust that will destroy their lungs and lead to their deaths.

What makes this so wrong is that silicosis is 100 percent preventable. But without proper occupational safeguards, over time silicosis becomes 100 percent fatal.

The story of gemstone grinding in India is one of exploitation, misery, deprivation and the death of thousands of poor people. It is also a story of neglect by the Government of India.

Why is it that we know so little in the United States? We purchase all sorts of products without any idea of who made them, where and under what conditions. Shouldn't it be a natural instinct to want to know? It's our world, but we do not ask.

It does not have to be this way.

There is great urgency here. In 2009, in the area around Khumbhat City alone, 29 more agate grinders died of silicosis. Since the beginning of 2010, two more workers have been killed. Scores of others have difficulty walking even a few yards due to shortness of breath.

It would not cost very much to install proper exhaust ventilation systems combined with a wet grinding methods that would save the lives of the agate workers and their families. It really comes down to whether or not enough of us will raise our voices demanding that the jewelry companies importing agate and other gemstones from India clean up their operations. We should also ask our government to raise this issue with the Government of India, and to help.

## **Where Can You Find Agate Gemstones? Everywhere!**

There are over 600 bead stores across the United States that sell agate jewelry—much of it from India. There are at least a dozen bead societies in the U.S. and Canada that hold monthly meetings, and 27 websites dedicated to beads.

## Gemstones of Death

### **Mr. Haresh Mafatbhai Parmar**

*Haresh died from silicosis on June 11th, 2009 after 20 years of gemstone grinding.*

When we met him during our visit to Shakarpur in February 2009, Mr. Haresh Mafatbhai Parmar was lying on the ground in front of the small one-room home he and his wife shared with an

uncle, who was blind. Mr. Parmar was terribly emaciated, really just skin and bones. He could not walk and he was struggling to breathe even though he was lying down motionless.



He told us he started grinding gemstones when he was 13 or 14 years old. In July 2008, when he was about 32, he got sick. He was told he had tuberculosis. He spent time in the hospital, received treatment and was released on February 13, 2009. He was waiting for more medicine to arrive. He was struggling to breathe as he explained that both his mother and his father had died seven years ago from grinding gemstones.

Haresh Mafatbhai Parmar died on June 11, 2009, less than four months after our meeting. He did not die of tuberculosis. He died of silicosis after years of breathing in silica dust while grinding gemstones. The dust ate away and destroyed his lungs.

### **Raman Lallubhai Vaghela**

**\*Seventeen Cents an Hour to do One of the Most Dangerous Jobs in the World\***

*Raman was one of the first gemstone workers to stand up to the gemstone traders about controlling the silica dust. He died on September 8th, 2009.*

Raman Lallubhai Vaghela also started grinding agate when he was just 12 or 13 years of age. For 20 years his specialty was creating beautiful heart-shaped pendants and earrings. He was skilled and fast and it took him just five or six minutes to shape each heart, for which he was paid a penny and a half. If he ground 11 stones an hour, he earned 17 cents. Working seven hours he could take home \$1.19 a day. He could have earned a little more, but he had taken an advance from the trader, borrowing 32,000 rupees, just \$692.50. Yet for the rest of his life he was “bonded” to the trader until he could pay off his debt. To pay off his debt, his wage was cut in half, from 33 ½ cents to just 17 cents an hour.



Raman worked on 77 gemstones a day, 462 a week and 24,000 a year. In his twenty years of work, he shaped nearly 500,000 stones. To shape the hearts, every gemstone he held threw dust

off the emery wheel, onto his face, lips, ears, and hair. It settled onto his clothes and the ground around him. He breathed in the dust every day and so did his neighbors as the dust spread beyond the workshop. After 20 years of breathing in the silica dust, Mr. Vaghela was too weak to work. He was constantly short of breath and could barely walk more than a few steps. He lost weight and was as thin as a pencil. He did not have the strength to lift even the most modest weight. This is what happens with silicosis. By the time Raman Vaghela felt the symptoms, it was too late. The silica dust had clogged his lungs, and there is no cure.

In 2007, Raman stopped working. He underwent treatment for tuberculosis and took some medicines. At times he felt a little better and actually gained a pound or two. But deep down, he told us, he knew that no one could help him now. *“Everyone knows about the dangers,”* he went on, *“but we’re helpless. There are no other jobs.”*

When we met Raman in February 2009, he was terribly thin and exhausted. His eyes were bloodshot. Holding them in his hand, he showed us some of the beautifully colored agate hearts he had shaped. When we asked him, he said he really did not know where the hearts went, but he imagined they went out of the country.

Raman Lallubhai Vaghela died on September 8, 2009. He was a special person. He was an artist who painted beautiful images on the walls of his parents’ home. Raman was also among the first to stand up and rally other agate workers to fight back to demand that the traders install exhaust systems to control the deadly silica dust.

Before he died, he told us that the trader he had worked for for 20 years had never stopped by even once to see how he was doing.

### **Children Work on Gemstones That Will Kill Them**

*This boy is 10 years old and has been grinding for 2 years.  
He works for 4 hours every day.*

*A deadly dust of silica lies on the  
child's hair, eyebrows, ears, nose,  
hands, arms, and clothing.*



When we visited another village where we had heard that gemstones were being shaped, we came across a young boy grinding agate. He told us he was 10 years old and had been grinding agate for the last two years.

In fact, he looked more like eight, in which case he may have started grinding agate when he was just six years old.



The boy sat on the opposite side of the grinding wheel from a young man. Both were grinding small stones that would eventually be sold in the United States and other countries as beaded necklaces and bracelets. As they shaped the small beads, the dust flew everywhere. You could see the silica dust on the child's hair, on his eyebrows, ears, nose, on his hands and arms and on his clothing. In fact, they were sitting in the deadly dust, which was everywhere. The boy said he worked half a day, for four hours, and earned 54 cents, or about 13 ½ cents an hour. The worker across from the child, who looked like he was in his early 20s, said he earned 40 rupees for half a day, or 22 cents an hour.

***Gemstone workers taking a break, covered in deadly silica dust***

Everywhere we turned, there were stories of sickness and death. Munival was sitting hunched over in front of his house. He was sick with silicosis, and like the others, he had to strain to breathe and was too weak to walk. His three sons had been in school until the eighth grade, but now they were working.



Munival told us that power lines and electricity had reached the village in 1984. The very next day a trader showed up and introduced gemstone grinding to the village people, telling them they would earn much more this way than in agriculture. The trader never said a word about how dangerous the work was. Looking back, Munival estimates that 15 people in his village have died from grinding—including a couple who left two children orphaned. There are some 12 or 13 widows, and four other workers are sick like him.