AGATE WORKERS OF KHAMBHAT, GUJARAT
By Sanjiv Pandita

The Khambhat region in Gujarat, India was and remains famous for its agate stone polishing for hundreds of years. Polishing agate is predominantly a home-based industry here, with more than 30,000 people engaged in this trade. This occupation, however, is still a death trap for workers, many of who have died of silicosis (see box on next page) and continue to suffer today.

AMRC visited Khambhat in July along with Mr Jagdish Patel*, a health and safety activist working in the region. The agate trade in the region is controlled by traders who supply the raw material (agate stone) to the workers, either directly or via middlemen. Workers in turn polish the stone and are paid by piece rate (a pittance compared to the profits traders make). There is no formal employer-employee relation, even though everyone seems to be working for the rich traders.

The workers in this trade are from the economically and socially backward class. Many are migrant landless labourers. The polished stones are mostly exported to Middle Eastern countries and even some European countries. Some of the products are even displayed in the fabulous showrooms in Khambhat.

On our visit to the region, we found at many places, every other house engaged in agate polishing. The method of polishing is very crude and requires relatively low investment. A grinding wheel and a motor are all one needs to set up a polishing unit. Workers either polish at home or at the middleman’s facility. If they polish at home they may either own the equipment or rent it from the middleman. On average workers make 100 Rs a day (about US$2) but income depends on availability of electricity. Stones are polished either by holding them with two fingers and pressing against the grinding wheel or placing 2-4 stones in a slot in a wooden plank and holding them against the grinding wheel. There are lots of hazards associated, like dust, vibration, noise, electricity, and uncomfortable sitting posture (ergonomics). The dust is worst of all and has killed many workers. We spoke to a woman who was polishing...
Facts about silicosis

Silicosis is a respiratory disease, which severely affects the lungs. It is caused by inhalation of the silica dust at workplace. It affects the workers who work in dusty environment. Some of the occupations which can cause silicosis are mining, stone cutting and grinding, construction work, sand blasting, foundry work, and china manufacturing. Silicosis develops gradually and continuous exposure for 7 to 10 years can develop into silicosis. Silicosis causes damage to lungs (fibrosis) reducing their capacity and strain the heart as oxygen intake is reduced. Initially, workers with silicosis may have no symptoms. As silicosis progresses, there may be difficulty in breathing and other chest symptoms such as coughing. Infectious complications may cause fever, weight loss, and night sweats. Silicosis is fatal in severe cases. Unfortunately, many victims are young and otherwise healthy people. Silicosis reduces the body’s immune system and makes it susceptible to other infections, the most common being tuberculosis. Silicosis is a permanent condition, irreversible by any treatment. Medications only bring temporary relief to the affected person. Silicosis continues to develop even if the worker is removed from a hazardous workplace.