



Ananda Foundation

Field Notes: India

*The Quarry **

My daughter and I arrived in June, before the monsoon in the North Hill of Thuvakkudimalai, India, at the earth-torn remnant of a nearly depleted quarry in the south of India. When I come upon the scene and looked down below, my brain trips and flips over in my pounding skull. A long irregular line of small, crouching figures is staggering up the steep hill with baskets of rocks balancing precariously on their heads. The scorching heat and the gravel dust clouds all blend together to form a devilish entity, taunting and daring us to enter. My knees go weak and I can only helplessly stand there at the top, looking at hell from the crumbling crater rim.

No agriculture thrives here, no birdsong, no rhythmic singing of peasants sharing the task to separate wheat from chaff, no children hiding behind the cows or sheep, no sound of laughter. There is only a deep yawning gray hole. The quarry is not the silver gray of grandmother's hair, or the gleaming steel grey of metal. This gray is a dead gray, lifeless except for the clicking, chipping sounds that bounce around the high shaggy walls. There is little relief in this real-life painting, Except for the muted, faded clothes that wrap around the thin, dark bodies of the workers; there is no color at all.

The tribal people who work here, on the edge of hell and slavery, are bonded untouchables; beyond untouchable. They are called Otta Naikars, and Padayachi Gounders, unclassified populations drawn away from distant villages .Without land, without crops, without income, their grandparents and parents migrated here to this treeless rock 40 or 50 years ago, caught in a mesh of hunger and promissory notes to the recruiters who carried them to this treeless rock. Their identity cards, if they have one, list them as b.c. "backward class," and more or less, like the quarry, at the bottom of even the Dalits in social hierarchy. Annamalai, who is now 63, remembered his early life, nothing but sheer poverty." He

states it simply. “At the age of 12, I was brought by an agent to this quarry field.” Over the next two decades, he gradually brought his relatives from their native places. It took Annamalai and the other Gounders and Naikars who came with him, packed like sardines in the back of a swaying lorry, four years of hard labor just to pay the traveling debt.

Though bonded labor is illegal in India, it is by no means finished. Bonded laborers long back, often fall prey to brokers. Husbands and sons are tempted by offers that will advance 5000 to 10,000 rupees (\$US20 to\$40) depending upon the size of the family members. Once they take money from employers they will be hooked and almost never come out of this gravelly net.

**Field notes by Sheree.*

In 2004, Ananda gave a grant to start a school for children of this stone quarry. Simultaneously, their parents are getting helped through microcredit loans to start small businesses such as fruitcarts and tea stalls.

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