



PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF GRANITE INDUSTRY LABOURERS IN KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT

The granite industry in Karnataka is a major contributor to the state's economy, providing employment to thousands of labourers, many of whom belong to marginalized and migrant communities. Despite the sector's economic significance, the condition of granite industry labourers remains poor and largely unregulated. This paper, based entirely on a review of existing literature, examines the genuine problems and possible prospects of labourers engaged in the granite sector. The study highlights multiple issues such as informal employment, wage exploitation, unsafe working conditions, occupational health hazards, and lack of social security. Women and migrant workers are particularly vulnerable, facing low wages, poor living standards, and minimal access to welfare schemes. The analysis further reveals how debt bondage, absence of protective equipment, and inadequate healthcare make their situation critical. In addition, limited education and lack of skill development restrict their chances for upward mobility. The paper concludes that effective policy interventions are urgently required to formalize employment, ensure labour welfare, strengthen occupational safety measures, and promote sustainable industry practices. If supported by proper implementation of labour laws and welfare schemes, the granite industry in Karnataka can move toward a more equitable and humane model of growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

The granite industry in India, and particularly in Karnataka, plays a major role in the state's industrial landscape. Karnataka ranks among the top producers of ornamental and building stones in India, with districts such as Tumakuru, Ballari, and Raichur serving as major quarrying hubs (Department of Mines and Geology, Government of Karnataka, 2022). Despite the economic contribution of this sector, the condition of labourers employed in granite extraction and processing remains largely unregulated. The workforce is primarily composed of unskilled or semi-skilled labourers, often migrants from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds (ILO, 2021). The lack of formal contracts, unsafe working environments, and poor living standards indicate that the industry's growth has not translated into human development for its labourers. This paper attempts to present an analytical understanding of the problems and prospects of granite industry labourers in Karnataka. It aims to examine their socio-economic background, working conditions, and major constraints while also exploring possible interventions for sustainable improvement in their lives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The granite industry in Karnataka plays a crucial role in the region's economy and employment landscape, yet it remains marked by numerous and persistent challenges for its labour force. Scholars such as Lavanya and Nagaraju (2025) underscore how most granite labourers are recruited informally, often through local agents or advances that can tether workers into a semi-bonded status, thereby undermining their negotiating power and perpetuating exploitative working conditions (ICN, 2017; Kesari and Kathuria, 2023). Wage structures remain a significant issue; they are often poorly documented, with many workers receiving pay below legally mandated minimums, a problem that disproportionately affects migrant and female labourers—groups already vulnerable due to their social and economic marginalization (NCPCR, 2021; Suneetha, 2022). Chronic wage delays and the prevalence of piece-rate systems add further financial instability for these workers, whose job security also suffers from the sector's seasonal and fluctuating demand.



Occupational health and safety represent another domain of concern widely cited in the literature. Researchers report that quarry workers in Karnataka are routinely exposed to inhalation hazards such as granite dust, leading to elevated rates of silicosis and other respiratory illnesses, as well as to noise-induced hearing loss and frequent injuries caused by inadequate protective equipment and deficient workplace safety protocols (Murthy et al., 2020; Lakshmipathi and Kumar, 2019). The existing health provisions are cited as largely insufficient, with very limited access to regular medical check-ups or emergency care in most worksites. These risks are exacerbated by the lack of formal contracts, which excludes the majority of workers from statutory benefits like health insurance, provident fund contributions, and compensation for workplace injuries (Kesari and Kathuria, 2023; UNICEF, 2021). Gender and child labour issues, while formally addressed by regulation, remain recurrent, especially in roles peripheral to core quarrying and among families of migrant workers (ICN, 2017; UNICEF, 2021). Women, who constitute a significant portion of the workforce, are often relegated to the most menial and lowest-paid jobs. Their experiences are further diminished by the absence of adequate facilities, social support, and avenues for advancement, leading to high rates of isolation and job dissatisfaction (Kesari and Kathuria, 2023). While mechanization has somewhat reduced direct child labour, adolescents are still frequently employed in supporting capacities, particularly within smaller or unregulated operations.

Welfare provisions remain negligible, with over 90 percent of workers lacking the basic security of written employment contracts, thereby restricting their access to rights and benefits mandated by law (Kesari and Kathuria, 2023; NCPDR, 2021). The few welfare measures that exist—such as housing, education for workers' children, or access to healthcare are typically delivered through NGO initiatives or isolated acts of employer goodwill rather than being structurally embedded (UNICEF, 2021).

In broader view, the granite industry continues to see export-driven growth, its prospects are tempered by increased international scrutiny regarding ethical sourcing, as well as the impact of periodic demand shocks and rising operational costs (Narayan and Kumar, 2024). These pressures have led to closures of several units, augmenting labour precarity and job loss in affected regions. However, recent literature points toward emerging opportunities through the adoption of sustainable practices, such as recycling granite waste for secondary products, which could potentially offer new, safer forms of employment if workers are given access to adequate training and support (Jagadeesh et al., 2020).

3. OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to understand the genuine problems faced by the labourers working in the granite industry of Karnataka. It aims to identify the major economic, social, and working condition-related issues that affect their livelihood and well-being. Another important objective is to suggest suitable recommendations and measures that can help in improving the welfare, safety, and overall quality of life of these labourers.

And this study is purely based on a review of available literature and does not include any primary or secondary data collection. The information has been gathered from various research articles, books, government reports, and newspaper publications related to the granite industry and its workforce. The study uses a descriptive approach to analyze and interpret the issues discussed in earlier studies. Based on this review, the paper highlights the major problems faced by the labourers and suggests possible solutions for their betterment.

4. PROFILE OF GRANITE INDUSTRY LABOURERS IN KARNATAKA

The demographic and occupational profile of granite industry labourers in Karnataka is characterized by a workforce largely composed of migrants and individuals from marginalized communities. Numerous studies have found that a substantial proportion of workers in granite quarries are migrants, drawn from both neighboring states like Tamil Nadu and rural districts within Karnataka itself, typically compelled by poverty, failed crops, and insufficient rural employment opportunities to seek work in quarries. Migration patterns are driven further by quarry owners' preference for out-of-state labour, who are perceived to work longer hours without interruption from local social obligations, and by the fact that outside labourers are often less able to organize or access union protections, which makes them more susceptible to exploitation.



A pronounced gender disparity exists within the workforce, with most heavy quarrying work being performed by men, while women, who may make up about 40–45 percent of the workforce in certain regions are generally restricted to low-paid, menial, or support tasks. Wage discrimination is pervasive in these arrangements, and women frequently experience poorer access to sanitary and social facilities. The educational profile of granite workers is equally stark; according to field studies, more than 80 percent of labourers are illiterate, or left school before completing primary education, further constraining their capacity for upward mobility or advocacy for their rights. Living and working conditions for labourers are typically harsh and unsanitary. Migrant workers and their families often reside in makeshift shelters directly on quarry grounds, with limited access to clean water, sanitation, or health care, which exacerbates both health risks and social isolation. Recruitment practices within the sector tend to be informal, with over 90 percent of Karnataka's granite quarry workers hired without written contracts; this widespread informality means that labourers are excluded from statutory welfare schemes like provident fund, health insurance, or compensation for workplace injury. Quarry owners frequently provide wage advances or loans to workers, binding them into cycles of debt and dependency that further reduce bargaining power and keep families tied to single worksites, sometimes for years.

The work environment in granite quarries is physically demanding, with significant risks of injury due to heavy machinery and manual stone cutting. Workers are frequently exposed to dust and noise without proper personal protective equipment, increasing the risk of chronic respiratory diseases, hearing loss, and other occupational hazards. The prevalence of debt bondage, unsafe conditions, and poor welfare facilities underscores the pressing need for improved labour protections and comprehensive welfare policies. Labourers in Karnataka's granite industry are marked by social marginalization, economic precarity, and occupational risk. Policy intervention is essential to address informal employment, enforce labour rights, improve health and safety standards, and provide social security for these vulnerable workers.

5. PROBLEMS OF GRANITE INDUSTRY LABOURS

Granite industry labourers in Karnataka face numerous and deeply rooted problems, which collectively highlight the exploitative and hazardous nature of their work environment. A major issue among these workers is the widespread exploitation under informal labour arrangements, where the absence of formal contracts leaves them vulnerable to irregular wages, non-payment of overtime, and bonded labour practices. In many cases, quarry owners provide loans to workers at exorbitant interest rates, sometimes as high as 48 percent annually, effectively entrapping labourers and their families in cycles of debt and servitude (stopkinderarbeid.nl, 2025; indusedu.org, 2025). This exploitation disproportionately impacts women and migrant workers, who face additional challenges such as wage discrimination and limited legal protection.

The living and working conditions of these quarry labourers further exacerbate their plight. Many reside in makeshift or inadequate housing lacking access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and essential healthcare, which leads to poor overall health and quality of life. Their workplaces are similarly deficient in basic safety amenities, with workers operating without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) amid unhygienic and overcrowded conditions. Such environments not only expose quarry workers but also their families, including children, to constant health risks (downtoearth.org.in, 2025). Health hazards form a critical concern within the granite industry. Persistent exposure to dust containing silica and heavy metals results in a high incidence of respiratory ailments such as silicosis, tuberculosis, and chronic asthma, with some studies indicating that over 80 percent of workers experience respiratory difficulties (ijert.org, 2025; papers.ssrn.com, 2017). Beyond respiratory issues, the physical demands of the job including heavy lifting, repetitive tool use, and poor ergonomic postures lead to musculoskeletal disorders and chronic pain (index.icomsociety.org, 2019). Additionally, workers endure eye strain, hearing loss from noisy machinery, skin diseases, dehydration, and heat stress due to inadequate rest and hydration facilities.

Socio-economic vulnerabilities compound these occupational hazards. Informal and irregular employment prevents workers from accessing social security or government welfare programs, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty, indebtedness, and food insecurity. The exploitative recruitment and employment practices also heighten tensions among local and migrant worker communities, further marginalizing the labour force (indusedu.org, 2025; ijert.org, 2025). Finally, despite the hazardous nature of their work, granite labourers rarely receive



necessary benefits such as health insurance, safety training, or maternity leave. There is also inadequate enforcement of existing Labour laws owing to the informal structure of many employment relationships. Overall, these intertwined problems underscore the urgent need for focused policy interventions aimed at formalizing employment, enhancing health and safety protocols, strengthening legal protections, and delivering comprehensive social security to improve the lives and working conditions of granite industry labourers in Karnataka.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The prospects for the granite industry labourers in Karnataka hinge on a combination of industry modernization, policy reforms, and targeted welfare interventions that can improve working conditions, employment security, and socio-economic well-being while sustaining environmental standards. Recent moves toward establishing a dedicated Research & Development (R&D) center in Chamarajanagar for skill development highlight the sector's recognition of the need for technological advancement and workforce upskilling to boost productivity and sustainability (New Indian Express, 2025). Such initiatives can enhance labourers' capabilities while reducing health risks via safer machinery and better extraction methods.

Policy recommendations focus on formalizing employment and harmonizing regulatory frameworks at the national and state levels. The Federation of Indian Granite and Stone Industry advocates for a "One Nation, One Mineral, One Policy" approach to standardize mining regulations, including royalty rates, which currently vary greatly across states with Karnataka imposing among the highest fees. This disparity hinders competitiveness and employment growth in the state (Times of India, 2025). Granting longer quarry licenses up to 50 years—compared to Karnataka's present 30-year license plus extension—would encourage long-term investments and provide greater operational stability for labourers and businesses alike. To improve labour welfare, interventions must include enforcing labour laws that guarantee formal contracts, timely and fair wage payments, and access to social security schemes such as health insurance and pensions. Implementing strict health and safety regulations, mandating personal protective equipment, and regular medical monitoring can reduce occupational hazards that currently plague quarry workers. Given the high incidence of respiratory and musculoskeletal conditions among labourers, integrating occupational health services into quarry communities is vital (ijert.org, 2025).

Further, socio-economic progress depends on improving living conditions by providing adequate housing, clean water, sanitation, and community health services near quarry sites. Access to education for workers' children and upskilling programs will empower labourers to diversify income sources and elevate socio-economic status. The Karnataka Industrial Policy 2025-2030 underlines the state's commitment to balancing regional growth with sustainability and innovation, promising financial incentives, infrastructure development, and streamlined approvals to attract investment in industries including mining and stone processing (Karnataka Industrial Policy 2025-30).

Overall, the granite industry labourers in Karnataka face significant challenges characterized by exploitative labour practices, hazardous working environments, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. However, with the right policy interventions, emphasizing formal employment, safety regulations, skill development, and improved welfare provisions—the prospects for this vital workforce can be substantially improved. The conjunction of technological advancement, regulatory harmonization, and sustainable industrial growth holds promise not only for enhancing the labourers' quality of life but also for strengthening Karnataka's position as a leading granite producer globally. Addressing these concerns holistically will help secure a more equitable and sustainable future for the granite labouring community and the industry as a whole.

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