

‘Epidemic’ of injuries

In a shocking report on accidents and injuries in auto component making units, Safe in India Foundation reveals the widespread **lack of safety measures** on the factory floor that is devastating the lives of hundreds of migrant workers. **BY DIVYA TRIVEDI**

“NO worker in any factory in Sidcul is safe,” said Laxman Rathore, looking at his hand, which was injured in a recent factory accident. He had lost three fingers. Sidcul is an industrial area in Rudrapur, Uttarakhanda, where over 200 automobile parts manufacturing units are located.

Laxman Rathore (24), who hails from Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, dropped out of school after class IX owing to his family’s strained circumstances. He moved to Sidcul and, like many migrant labourers on temporary employment, went through several jobs before joining PDPL, an auto-brand subsidiary, where he met with the accident.

Laxman Rathore said that when he sustained injuries while operating a press machine, he was left bleeding on the floor for an hour. Despite having an ambulance at hand, the management did not use it to send him to a hospital. It was his fellow workers who took him to the hospital on a motorbike after noticing that he was unconscious. Even at the hospital, he was not treated for about an hour although he was losing blood. This was not his first accident. In 2018, just after he had begun working, he lost a finger following a short circuit in the machine.

According to him, workers are also not adequately compensated for their work. He said: “I earn Rs.10,200 after years of work experience. When the orders are low, my pay is reduced, and I get just

Rs.6,000-7,000 per month. It is difficult to survive with a family on this amount.”

Laxman Rathore got married two years ago and has a one-year-old daughter. He wonders how he will survive as he has lost four of his fingers. This is a question that is all too familiar for workers in the auto sector, who are never sure that they will survive the working day unscathed.

Laxman Rathore is not alone in facing this kind of situation. There seems to be ‘an epidemic of crushed injuries’ in the auto manufacturing sector. Incidents of men and women

workers losing one or more of their fingers or part of a hand are par for the course. On an average, almost two fingers are lost in a crush injury.

The auto sector, one of the largest private employers, employs more than 3.7 crore workers. Of them, about 80 lakh are employed directly, and the rest by backward and forward linkages. By 2026, this number is projected to increase to 10 crore.

INDUSTRY-WIDE PROBLEM

Since 2017, Safe In India Foundation (SII) has been documenting accidents suffered by workers like Lax-



AT AN AUTO COMPONENT making unit. Workers often work in hazardous conditions in these units with little protection.

SAFE IN INDIA FOUNDATION

man Rathore to highlight how the lack of safety measures on factory floors is scarring lives permanently. In its latest report titled “Crushed 2021”, the third in a series, the SII has shared the stories of workers such as Laxman Rathore. These accidents seem to be an industry-wide phenomenon.

In an auto components factory located in Neemrana, Rajasthan, Lokendra Singh (39), a migrant worker from Hamirpur, Uttar Pradesh, lost two fingers while working on a grinder machine. In a leading original equipment manufacturer (OEM) factory in Rudrapur, Uttarakhand, Raju Sharma (32) lost four fingers while working as a helper on a power press. He had been working in the auto industry since 2012.

In another auto components factory in Waghodiya, Gujarat, a 47-year-old worker, who wished to remain anonymous, lost three fingers despite informing his supervisor and die-setter in August about problems in the machine he was working on. In Gurugram, Haryana, Mangesh Mishra (24) from Balia, Uttar Pradesh, lost four fingers in a power press accident in a Tier 1 auto components factory. In an auto components factory in Faridabad, Haryana, Amjad Khan (18), lost his right hand when, despite being a packer, he was asked to help on a power press.

In Pune, Umesh Ramesh Dhake (44) sustained critical injuries on his head and neck and died after a robotic unit fell on him, possibly owing to a snag in a sensor, in an auto components factory. In Chennai, Vinoth Raj (35), a junior engineer, died of injuries in an accident at a leading OEM factory in Sriperumbudur on April 6, 2021.

These are but a handful of examples of workers sustaining or succumbing to injuries in auto parts factories. Since 2017, the SII has tried to assist more than 2,500 injured workers across different sectors. In its latest report, it has presented the data compiled over a period of five years.

The SII found that more than 80 per cent of the injured workers were



AN SII TEAM MEMBER talking to workers about ESIC benefits.

employed in the supply chains of some of the largest auto brands. Between April 2020 and September 2021, the SII found that 93 per cent of the injured workers in Gurugram and 75 per cent in Faridabad were employed by suppliers of Maruti Suzuki, Hero Motocorp and Honda, or a combination of them.

The rest of the injured workers were employed with other OEMs, mainly Tata Motors, TVS, Bajaj and Eicher. In Faridabad, from April to September 2021, 55 per cent of the injured workers were employed with OEMs such as JCB, Yamaha and Escorts. Earlier, between December 2020 and March 2021, this proportion was 39 per cent. In Rudrapur and Neemrana, 71 per cent of injured workers were employed with OEMs such as Ashok Leyland, Bajaj, Hero Motocorp, Honda, Mahindra & Mahindra, Maruti Suzuki, and Tata Motors.

The callousness of the managements in the units of such big brands is telling. Most of the injured workers are migrants and dissuaded from joining labour unions. They belong to the most vulnerable sections of society. Some 92 per cent of the migrant workers surveyed by the SII hailed from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, had little education and earned very low wages.

The survey found that the lower the salary and education level of a worker, the worse the injury. Nearly 81 per cent of them were educated only up to class X and 71 per cent of

them earned less than Rs.10,000 a month. Many of them were forced to do 12-hour shifts and not paid any overtime wages. Some 70 per cent of them were employed on contractual basis with often unclear employer-employee relationships, which made legal protection inaccessible to many of them. Also, 62 per cent of them were below 30 and suffered terrible injuries in the prime of their lives.

About 70 per cent of the injured workers received their Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) e-Pehchaan identity cards after they sustained injuries in accidents and not on the date of joining. Hence, they could not use the ESIC facility through their working lives, until they suffered grave injuries, despite paying their ESIC contribution. Interestingly, all the injured workers promptly received their cards a few days after the accidents took place. The ESIC card enables workers, and their eligible dependents, to access primary, secondary and tertiary health services, and compensation in case of sickness, injuries, unemployment, childbirth and death.

These mishaps in the Indian auto sector cannot be attributed to incompetence. The companies in the auto sector have the wherewithal to improve worker safety, prevent accidents and push up Indian labour productivity from its current rank of 115 in the world, according to the SII. These are not problems restricted to micro, small and medium companies; accidents occur in 22 per cent of

members of the Automotive Components Manufacturers Association of India (ACMA), which are some of the largest factories and suppliers. Over 50 per cent of the injuries reported to the SII occurred on power press machines, which are considered more unsafe when compared to other machines. Besides, a majority of the crush injuries occurred on power presses that should have had safety sensors but did not.

DILUTED LABOUR LAWS

To compound the problem, government data grossly under-reports factory injuries, and the new Labour Code on Occupational Safety & Health (OSH) and Working Conditions (WC) may make matters worse, according to the SII. The new Code has at least eight major dilutions of factory safety, most of which have led to confusion at the ground level. For instance, the Indian Factories Act, 1948, allows overtime, and the Code has now increased the total spread of the working day from 10.5 hours to 12 hours, but the workers are not paid the required double rate of overtime. Most of the accidents take place when workers are engaged in 12-hour shifts.

The report said: “With such disabling crush injuries, these vulnerable workers and their families are further pushed into a series of despairing events—mental and physical trauma of the injury, unemployment, high costs of residing in cities for treatment while many are not paid their salaries and a bureaucratic post-accident compensation process

with ESIC, if they are ESIC-registered at all.”

It added: “They struggle with the powerful employer, often unprofessional contractor (*thekedaar*), and bureaucracy, all of whom often do not empathise and/or support, when the workers need them the most. In a state of despair, workers and their families run from pillar to post for the right health treatment to retain some functioning of their crushed hands, and documentation to access entitlements, while also desperately trying to build a new income source.”

According to the report, many workers return to their villages or settle for lower-paying jobs, “sometimes with the same employer, who often promise a permanent job, to keep them quiet until the heat of the issues subsides, but rarely do; the impact on their dependents is catastrophic. These circumstances have been aggravated further by the COVID pandemic in the past two years.”

On the occasion of Republic Day, Dr Sandeep Sachdeva, co-founder and chief executive officer of the SII, released the report online in the presence of more than 100 injured auto sector workers from 11 locations, who shared their testimonies. Many of them testified that safety measures were provided to them only when audits or inspections were to take place and these were promptly withdrawn soon after the audits were completed. Sometimes, the auditor was not even allowed inside the premises to interact with the workers. Some of the workers were asked to operate machines without any formal training. At short notice, they were called upon to perform the jobs that their seniors were meant to do.

Dr Sachdeva said: “We sincerely hope that the auto industry and the government listen to the hundreds of workers who have joined us today for the release of this report and do the needful, which is neither difficult nor expensive to achieve.”

The auto sector contributes about 7.1 per cent of the national gross domestic product (GDP), with the latest Automotive Mission Plan

2016-26 envisioning a rise in that figure to 12 per cent. It also accounts for 49 per cent of the Indian manufacturing GDP and, therefore, its quality and professionalism has an incomparable halo effect on the entire manufacturing sector, according to SII.

CORPORATE RESPONSE

Ever since 2019, the SII has been lobbying with auto companies concerning the injuries, to push them into constructive action. Maruti Suzuki has taken some initiatives towards remedying the situation by holding meetings, reducing the number of unsafe suppliers, conducting OSH sensitisation sessions with its Tier 1 suppliers and agreeing to extend the OSH infrastructure improvement activity from Tier 1 suppliers to Tier 2 suppliers.

I.V. Rao, former director of the Maruti Suzuki Centre for Excellence, said: “Safety is the most important pillar for operational excellence. An unsafe workplace with frequent accidents results in losses caused by highly fluctuating quality and productivity. Any investment in making a shop floor accident-free, that makes workers feel safe and focus better on their work, goes a long way in improving quality and productivity.”

However, Honda and Hero Motocorp are still lagging behind in this matter, although they have started engaging with the issue through periodic meetings. Among seven of the top 10 OEMs that the SII pursued from late 2020, Eicher and Hyundai have recently started addressing the issue constructively. Ashok Leyland, Bajaj, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Motors, and TVS have been unresponsive or have been irregular in their responses. A lot more remains to be done by the Society of Indian Auto Manufacturers and ACMA, the Central and State Ministries of Labour, MSME, Industry, Skill Development, and Corporate Affairs, the Bureau of Indian Standards, the trade unions and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) if the safety and livelihoods of workers are to be protected. □