

Sivakasi stuck in cycle of poverty

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This article was written by Craig Kielburger



The scars cover his face and arms.

Karuppasamy greets me at the door of his home – a shack made of corrugated tin – with a smile and downcast eyes.

The 14-year-old from the Indian town of Sivakasi introduces me to his parents and quietly begins telling me the story of his accident.

Three years ago he found a job at a local fireworks factory, hoping to make extra money for his family.

After only a few days, his foreman asked him to dispose of some improperly mixed explosive chemicals by lighting them on fire.

Karuppasamy said he didn't know how to do it, but his foreman insisted.

So he lit a match, but couldn't run away fast enough and he was immediately engulfed in flames.

Karuppasamy's parents – who also worked at the factory – heard the explosion and went searching for their son.

They found him on the ground and rushed him to the hospital, barely saving his life.

But he was left badly scarred.

Since then, Karuppasamy has spent most of his time at home because he says the other children find him "scary."

The right side of his face is burned and heavily wrinkled, as are both his forearms.

Some of his fingers have been fused together from the intense heat of the toxins.

Once a student who loved drawing and wanted to be a police officer, he can't even hold a pencil and hasn't been to school in years.



A child makes firecrackers in his home for a fireworks factory in Sivakasi, India. The area, known as "Little Japan," has dozens of fireworks factories, and children there often work in dangerous jobs despite official denials of the practise.

"My life was ruined by the foreman," he tells me.

As we speak, Karuppasamy's grandmother sits in the corner, making paper tubes for another fireworks factory, hoping to earn extra money to help cover her grandson's ongoing medical treatment.

His parents do the same.

The factory owners refused to pay for his hospital bills, and the government compensation his family received wasn't nearly enough.

So Karuppasamy's family has no choice but to keep making fireworks – even though it nearly killed their son.

Karuppasamy's story is not unusual in Sivakasi.

Known as "Little Japan" for its entrepreneurial spirit and many manufacturing plants, it produces 90 per cent of India's fireworks and much of the country's matches.

But many of them are made by children.

Every day, upwards of 50,000 kids – some as young as 8 – work with dangerous chemicals such as chloride, phosphorus and sulphur, making fireworks and matches that are shipped throughout the country and to the West.

If fact, Sivakasi has the largest concentration of child labourers in the world.

These child labourers work for 10 hours a day and are paid about a dollar a day.

There is no protective gear and very little training, so accidents are common.

While I am there, nine people are killed in an explosion at one of the town's 200 fireworks factories.

My guide, the head of a local organization working to end the use of children labouring in fireworks production, tells me they are like "human bombs" and that every day could be their last.

In the afternoon he takes me to one of the factories.

It's a long row of white buildings surrounded by a barbed wire fence.

The ground is barren and large parts of it are burned.

When we approach the gate, the guard is friendlier than expected.

I later learn that factory owners give cellphones to children throughout town and reward them for reporting any unfamiliar people.

That way, they have time to hide their underage workers.

He knew we were coming.

Each of the buildings in the factory houses a different step in production – from making the outer casings out of old newspapers to pouring in the mixed chemicals.

Every time we visit one of the factory's buildings, we find hastily abandoned workstations and children standing around, waiting for us to leave.

We enter a room with all the chemicals stored in open containers and are hit by a wall of terrible smell.

It's difficult to breathe and many of the workers cough regularly.

A lot of them are covered in a thin white film.

That's where we meet the foreman.

He tells us his factory is safe and points to buckets of water hanging from the wall.

He says they are there in case of fire, but we discover they are empty.

The water evaporated long ago in the hot sun.

Suddenly we hear a loud explosion.

Startled, we ask the foreman about it and he explains that it was a "controlled explosion" used to destroy leftover chemicals – the same kind that left Karuppasamy scarred.

After about an hour of being closely watched by the foreman, we decide to leave.

As we walk, it strikes me that the children of Sivakasi are stuck in a deadly cycle of poverty – their work is dangerous, but they are too poor to leave it.

And I begin to wonder how many similarly produced fireworks will make it to Canada for Victoria Day.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of *Free the Children* and co-authors of *Me to We*.