



# No Glimmer of Hope:

## Jharkhand's Mica Mines and Child Labour

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| Fatima Juned



Discussion Paper

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### ABSTRACT

In 2021 'Fenty Beauty', a leading makeup brand owned by the pop-star Rihanna, was criticised for using mica from mines in Giridih and Koderma, Jharkhand (Sirur, 2021). The news brought into limelight the discourse around industries thriving on cheap raw materials, especially ones acquired from illegal mica mines through child labour. The issue of child labour is not new in developing nations like India. Economic distress and poverty are significant drivers that force children to leave their education and take up exploitative and hazardous jobs. Even with policies to prevent both child labour and illegal mining, Jharkhand's mica mines are a unique case study in implementation failures. This paper seeks to understand the issue of child labour in the country through the particular case of mica mining in Jharkhand. It explores drivers, policy measures, and implementation gaps by comparing publicly available data with perspectives from stakeholders on the ground in Giridih and Koderma districts.

**Keywords:** Child Labour, Mica Mines, Jharkhand, Labour Rights

## INTRODUCTION

The International Labour Organization [ILO] defines child labour as:

***“work that deprives children (any person under 18) of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and/or mental development. It refers to work that is mentally, or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school, obliging them to leave school prematurely and, requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.” (International Labour Organization, n.d. a)***

According to the 2011 Census, there were 1 crore child labourers in India, out of which 45 lakhs were girls and 56 lakhs were boys (Census, 2011 as cited in UNICEF, n.d.). As shown in Table 1, while the total number of working children in the age group 5-14 years declined between 2001 and 2011, the number of such children increased in urban areas of the country, indicating the growing demand for child workers in menial jobs.

**Table 1:** Working Children in India 2001-2011

Year	Percentage of working children (5-14)			Total number of working children (5-14) (in millions)		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
2001	5.9	2.1	5.0	11.4	1.3	12.7
2011	4.3	2.9	3.9	8.1	2.0	10.1

**Source:** International Labour Organization (n.d. b)

According to Raj & Chauhan (2003) child labour in India is rooted in reasons like poverty, socio-economic conditions, parents' unemployment, labour scarcity, inadequate living conditions, etc. Parents often expect their children to help ease the burden of providing sustenance, thereby forcing the children to work.

## Legal Provisions

The Constitution of India, under Article 21 A, provides free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 and 14 (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Meanwhile, Article 24 prohibits the employment of children below the age of 14 years in hazardous occupations. Additionally, India has ratified the ILO conventions on Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (1973) that requires countries to set a minimum age for working and establish policies for the elimination of child labour. The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention of 1999mNo. 182 requires countries to take effective and time-bound measures to eliminate child labour (International Labour Organization, n.d. a). In Jharkhand specifically, the following laws and policies are in place to prevent child labour as well as illegal mining:

- The National Policy on Children of 2013 that recognises and affirms every child's right to life, education, participation, and protection.
- The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act of 2016 that prohibits the employment of any adolescent in hazardous work.
- The Jharkhand Minerals (Prevention of Illegal Mining, Transportation, and Storage) Rules of 2017 which prohibits buying, selling, and processing of minerals by non-registered dealers.

## MICA MINING AND CHILD LABOUR

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Mica is commonly known as '*dhibra*' among the locals in Jharkhand. Mining *dhibra* was declared illegal after the Forest Conservation Act came into effect in 1980, following which the government did not renew mining licences. The Koderma and Giridih districts of Jharkhand are rich in mica where its picking and mining are a significant source of income for the villages in the region for decades (Child In Need Institute [CINI] 2018). The demand for Mica comes primarily from the cosmetics industry, with millions of consumers around the globe.

The issue of child labour in India was mentioned in reports by The Guardian in 2014 & 2016 and Thompson Reuters in 2016 (Nesbitt, 2014; Bengtson & Paddison, 2016; Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2016). A SOMO & Terre Des Hommes (2015) report stated that at least 22,000 children were involved in mica mining in Jharkhand and Bihar. The two states are responsible for 25% of the world's mica production and the prevalence of child labour (SOMO & Terre Des Hommes, 2015).

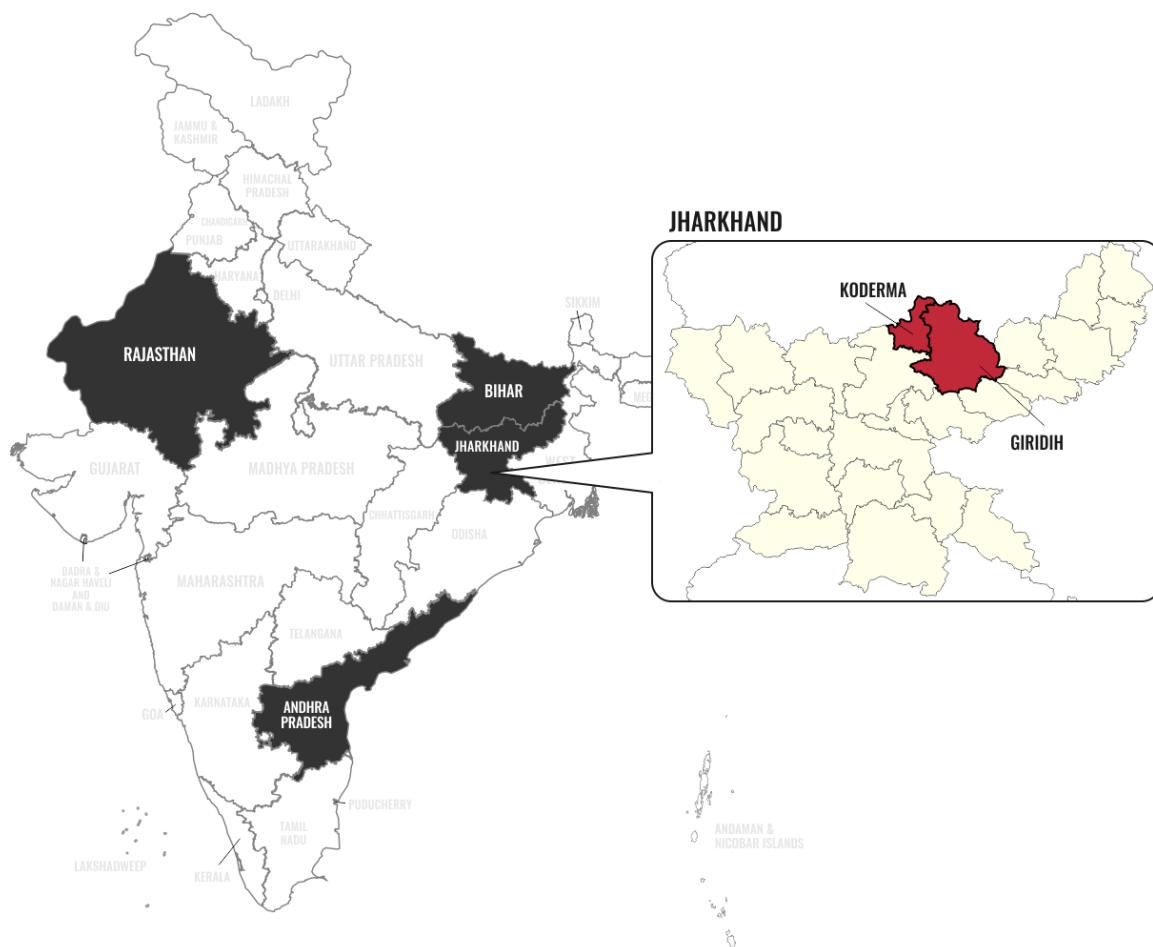
Mica mining, the trade that made the people of Jharkhand prosperous, declined after the 1980s due to the Forest Conservation Act. The businesses went underground. Now, mostly controlled illegally by contractors and mafias, the mines are a spot for many children to work and feed their families, explains Deepak Bara<sup>1</sup> (D. Bara, personal communication, January 7, 2022).

Mica mining is of two types. First, is the inferior quality of mica extracted from the topsoil called '*dhibra picking*' that is mainly done by women and children. Depending on the quality, anything between 5 to 25 rupees are paid, and each family picks around 20-25 kilograms of mica (Jamwal, 2019). The second type is a better quality of mica found in underground mines, known as '*rat holes*', where primarily male members work (*ibid.*).

Mica mining is a prominent source of income for families, as land in Jharkhand is primarily infertile. "*Logon ke paas option nahi hai bhojan kamane aur khane ka. Sirf bade agar chahe, toh sabka pet nahi paal sakti. Toh logon ko majboor hoke, bachche aur budhe, sabko jana padta hai mining ke liye.*" ("The people do not have other options to earn and put food on the table. Adults alone cannot feed the entire family. So, everyone, children as well as older people, has to mine") explains Deepak Bara (personal communication, January 7, 2022). The higher the number of members involved, the better the chances of collecting mica.

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<sup>1</sup> Deepak Bara is a Jharkhand-based filmmaker who shot a documentary titled 'The Ugly Side of Beauty'. The documentary showcases the hidden side of mica mining.

**Image 1:** Main Mica producing areas of India

Source: Bliss (2017)

## Major Push Factors for Child Labour in Jharkhand

**Poverty and Inequality:** As per Niti Aayog's Poverty Index (2016) Jharkhand, with a 42.16% multidimensionally poor<sup>2</sup> population, has the highest number of poor people in India. Poverty, lack of schooling, and income inequality have a significant impact on child labour. Recent work by found poverty to be a predominant factor that leads to child labour (Dumas, 2007 as cited in Abdullahi et al., 2016). The lack of schooling is also a factor leading to child labour. Underprivileged parents, themselves deprived of an education and adequate skills, often send their children to work, who then take up unskilled work (Basu, 1999 as cited in Sasmal & Guillen, 2015). In this way, children enter a generational cycle of poverty.

**Unemployment:** According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy [CMIE], Jharkhand's unemployment rate stood at 17.3% when the national rate was 7.91% in December 2021 (CMIE, 2022). With a high unemployment rate, poverty, limited resources, low and unregulated wages, there is no option for the children but to go to the mines with their parents for survival. Through the work of Shultz (1960 as cited in Edmonds & Pavcnik, 2005), child labour can be viewed from the perspective of

<sup>2</sup> Multidimensionally poor encompasses people who face various deprivations in their daily lives- healthcare, lack of education, unemployment, etc.



families welfare optimisation. This means that families might send their children to work if the return is greater than the alternate use of the child's time, including schooling. There exists a continuous trade-off between the immediate requirement and the long-term investment in the child.

As a volunteer, Deepak Vishwakarma<sup>3</sup> explains, "We go to the guardians and tell them to not let the child work. But the guardian replies, if the child does not collect mica, then what will we eat, and how will we feed the child. If the child does not work, when will you keep giving the child compensation? For government aid, we have to go to the office too many times and it is not readily available." (D. Vishwakarma, personal communication, January 11, 2022).

## IMPACT OF DHIBRA COLLECTION ON CHILDREN

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According to Deepak Bara, "approximately 2 lakh children are mining in Koderma and Giridih districts. However, the exact numbers are unknown." (D. Bara, personal communication, January 7, 2022). This problem of the unavailability of accurate data was worsened by the pandemic. Many children, who used to study in nearby towns, returned back home and started working in the mines during the lockdown. He adds, "More than adults, one will find children aged between 10-14 years at the mines. In the mine we visited, around 500-600 children were working." Vishwakarma adds, "70% of the children of my village go to the mines to collect mica in the morning and then go to give the mica to the collectors. Wherever there is mica, children go to collect mica with their guardians." (D. Vishwakarma, personal communication, January 11, 2022).

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights [NCPCR] (2018), in their survey report, mentioned that they had been aware of the child labour in Jharkhand. The report states that the Commission only took cognizance after the publishing of the 2018 *Terre Des Hommes* report. However, NCPCR could not verify the data on child labourers provided by the *Terre des Hommes* report (NCPCR, 2018, p.13). There has been no confirmation about the number of children working at the mines by the NCPCR or the state government to date. The varying numbers, lack of government data, and the increase in numbers of children working at the mines after COVID, as approximated by Deepak Bara, indicate severe blindspots around child labour.

### School drop-out rates

The low-income status of the families makes attending school a challenge for the children, as evidenced by Jharkhand's high drop-out rates. NCPCR's (2018) report and stakeholder interviews confirm this claim. An NGO member in Jharkhand mentioned, "Student-teacher ratio is a problem in the area. After 8th standard, most female students drop out from schools and many migrate", (Ankita<sup>4</sup>, personal communication, February 3, 2022). The NCPCR (2018) survey reported that 4988 adolescent girls between 15-18 years and 4545 children between 6-14 are not attending school. In Giridih and Koderma, 38% and 47% of adolescent boys, respectively, do not attend school. However, as per data from the District Information System for Education, these children are still officially enrolled in schools in the state. The inconsistency in available data and the on-ground reality is evident (ibid.).

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<sup>3</sup> D. Vishwakarma is a local of Jharkhand and a para-legal volunteer at the civil court, who visits families of children who work at the mines.

<sup>4</sup> Name changed. Ankita is a member of an NGO in Jharkhand.

The on-ground infrastructure of schools is poor, with no facility for online education, teachers, wash-rooms, and drinking water. The increasing digital divide and inaccessibility are worrisome (Ankita, personal communication, February 3, 2022). In the MPI uncensored headcount in school attendance, the state stood at 8.19% (Niti Aayog, 2021).

## Health Outcomes

Mining exposes children, especially those who collect dhibra with their bare hands without any protective gear, to serious health problems. Due to constant exposure to dust, children are at the risk of developing respiratory diseases, tuberculosis, and skin infections. “As the problem is highly under-reported, malnourishment is common in children and breast-feeding mothers of these areas,” informs Deepak Bara (personal communication, January 7, 2022). “Malnourishment is a common sight. 60% of the children from 20 villages are malnourished, who carry just one packed meal for the day to the hills for mica picking. In the case of tuberculosis, many are not aware they are suffering from the disease”, informs Ankita (personal communication, February 3, 2022). Padma Priyadarshini et al. (2016) found that malnourishment or undernutrition is one of the key determinants of tuberculosis.

Since undernutrition is linked to poor socio-economic predisposition, tuberculosis could be indirectly related to poverty (World Health Organization, 2005). The aforementioned data on malnutrition and poverty in Jharkhand corroborates that tuberculosis is high due to the higher poverty. The burden of treatment poses a heavy financial burden on poor households which prevents families from seeking adequate treatment. According to data from the Ayushman Bharat scheme<sup>5</sup>, the proportion of disease burden, meaning the impact of a health condition of tuberculosis, in the state was 3.8% in 2016. However, the state fact sheet shows that 100% of families are covered under the scheme (National Health Authority, 2022). “Medicine facilities are not available and the distance between Tisri and Giridih is more than 70 km. If a person could spend Rs. 5000 on transportation for a checkup then they would not require Ayushman Bharat,” says Ankita (personal communication, February 3, 2022). This would mean that if someone had the money for transportation they would not require the Ayushman Bharat scheme and conversely, if someone didn’t even have the money to commute to the hospital, they would be unable to avail the Ayushman Bharat scheme.

**Table 2:** National Family Health Survey 5 [NFHS 5]: District factsheet

Indicator	Giridih %	Koderma %	State (Jharkhand) %
Children under 5 years who are stunted (height-for-age)	31.9	34.6	39.6
Children under age 5 who are underweight (weight-for-age)	34.3	31.7	39.4
Children aged 6-59 months who are anaemic	62.8	60.0	67.5
Pregnant women aged 15-49 years who are anaemic	56.7	59.7	56.8

Source: NFHS 5 (2021a; 2021b; 2021c)

<sup>5</sup> Ayushman Bharat Yojana, also known as PM-JAY, is a scheme to help the economically vulnerable people who require healthcare facilities.



Data from NFHS 5 (2021a; 2021b; 2021c) gives an insight into the current maternal and child health indicators in Giridih and Koderma. The anaemia and malnutrition numbers in children between 6-59 months are at 67.5% and 39.4%, respectively. This is in sync with the numbers provided by the on-ground estimates.

## Unreported deaths

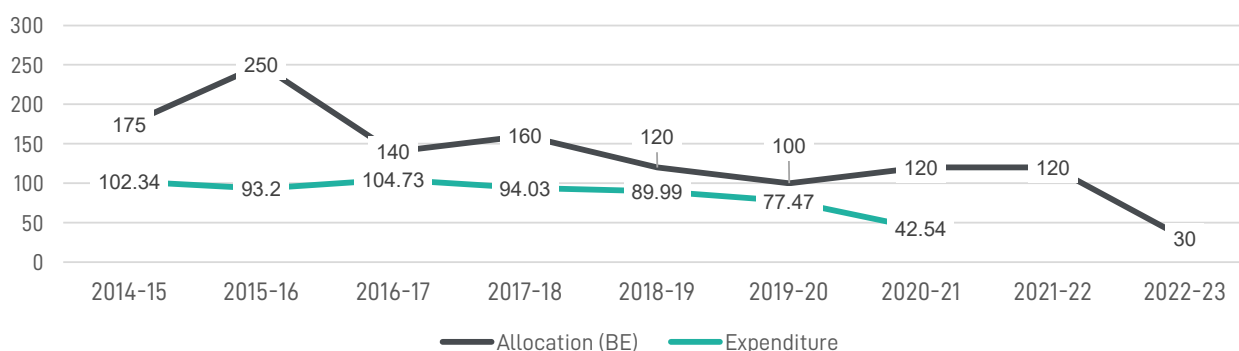
Stakeholder interviews reveal unreported deaths due to fear of unemployment and the scarcity of employment. A general understanding among the people is that media coverage of the problem might end the mica trade, taking away many people's only source of livelihood. Children are at greater safety risk, and many have lost their lives due to the mines collapsing. On 9 February 2022, Dainik Bhaskar Jharkhand reported the death of a 14-year-old girl who died while collecting dhibra (Bhaskar News, 2022). Deepak informs that "8-10 children have been victims of mines collapsing in the last 4-5 years." (D. Vishwakarma, personal communication, January 27, 2022). Many children go into the underground 'rat hole' mines to pick mica scrap without safety gears and often get trapped under the mud. The families of victims, who die in the rat holes, are not paid any compensation.

The process is not limited to just picking but also sorting the mica. To keep the workforce behind the operation a secret, and to escape scrutiny, "the factory owners ask the children to wear sarees, so they look like adults. They are paid low wages since mica can not be sold directly to companies. There exists a proper supply chain for the sale of mica." (D. Bara, personal communication, January 7, 2022).

## INTERVENTIONS

The National Child Labour Project seeks to eliminate all forms of child labour through identification of children working, raising awareness, and ensuring the convergence of services by various government departments (Ministry of Labour and Employment Government of India, n.d.-a). However, in Jharkhand, the districts covered under the scheme do not include Koderma, Giridih, or Tisri (Ministry of Labour and Employment Government of India, n.d.-b). Developing objective indicators for the selection of targeted districts is left to the State government. However, the current policy response shows a lack of priority and clarity on efforts to eliminate child labour in mica mines.

**Image 2:** Budget Allocation and Expenditure for National Child Labour Project 2014-23



**Source:** India Budget (2022), Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation (2021), Ministry of Labour and Employment (2020c; 2021d)

The graph gives us an insight into the trends in the budget allocated to the NCLP. It highlights the decline of 78.57%, from 140 crores in 2016-17 to 30 crores in 2022-23. In 2015-16, the budget allocation for NCLP saw a reduction of 60% in Revised Estimates. In 2018-19, the budget in the Revised Estimates was reduced to 93 crores as compared to the sanctioned 120 crores. In 2019-20, the Revised Estimates saw a decline of 21% (Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation, 2021). The steep decline of the budget in 2022-23 highlights the lack of intention towards addressing child labour in the country.

Under NCLP, the children are enrolled in Special Training Centres. They are provided education, mid-day meal, stipend, healthcare, etc., before they transition towards the formal education system. The minimum annual budget required under the NCLP scheme is 171 crores (ibid.). However, in the year 2021-22, only 120 crores were allocated to the scheme. This number further decreased in 2022-23, with 30 crores allocated. This reduction in the budget allocation, despite a minimum requirement under the scheme and the further decrease in the expenditure, showcases a lack of priority for the cause visualised through the graph.

At a general level, the lack of priority accorded to child labour can be observed by analysing two markers on India's progress on the Sustainable Development Goals [SDG]. Notably, child labour features in the SDG agenda on Goal 8.7, wherein the Niti Aayog SDG India Index (2021) does not mention much progress. Similarly, the India Voluntary National Review, while noting the progress on SDGs submitted to the United Nations [UN], also does not report any progress on eliminating child labour (Niti Aayog, 2020).

Stakeholder interviews with concerned state level government officials reveal an ad-hoc response to the issue. Officials from the Department of Mining in Jharkhand revealed that the problem of child labour in the state does not come under their scope of work. However, at the local level, steps are taken to raise awareness about child labour. The residents of the villages are oriented about child abuse through PPTs. Parents of children are informed about the impact of mining on children and its possible disadvantages (N. K. Singh<sup>6</sup>, personal communication, February). Singh says, "Our motive is to make the families of the districts understand, implement, and inform them about the harms of mica picking and how it could impact the child's health. We do not threaten." However, the DCPO also says, "If I have a ration shop near my house, the child will accompany the parent. It is the same for the mines."

The problem of child labour persists due to the availability of limited data and the under-reporting of cases of child labour. Several NGOs like the Kailash Satyarthi Foundation have been working through their Bal Mitra Gram [BMG] to improve the situation. The objective of BMG is to raise awareness about child rights education in villages (Malathy and Bain & Company, 2018).

However, Deepak Vishwakarma (personal communication, January 11, 2022) adds a grassroots perspective: "From what I have seen, when aid stops, children start going to the mines again. The reason children go to the mines is to feed themselves. There are no jobs. Since mica is available next to their houses, they will go. How long can the NGOs help us?"

The NCPCR (2018) survey had recommended the Anganwadi centres for vocational training. However, the NGO member informs that she has seen "Anganwadi centres that are non-functional.

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<sup>6</sup> Narendra Kumar is the District Child Protection Officer who has insights into the on-ground information about child labour.

There are no vocational training centres and government schemes do not reach the area effectively.” (Ankita, personal communication, February 3, 2022)

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

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As the paper discussed the reasons for child labour, a comprehensive analysis of the impact on the children, and the data inconsistencies about the child labour situation at the mica mines in Jharkhand was provided. We further discuss the policy recommendations to improve the situation in the state.

- An effective and robust monitoring system is required to collect data on child labour in India. A separate mechanism, other than the NCPDR, would help overcome inconsistency, unverifiability, and lack of data. A mechanism, at the Centre or State level would benefit both the government and NGOs working on child labour.
- Under the MGNREGS, work should be thoroughly monitored to ensure employment for adults. This will indirectly impact the presence of children in mines. However, as communicated from an on-ground source, “there are middle men who install machines to do the work. Hence, even though people have job cards, they do not get to work.” While the government transfers money into the workers’ accounts, only 10% of it stays with them. Since the contractor gets the work done through machines, they coerce the workers into refunding the money by keeping their job cards until the payment is made. (Ankita, personal communication, February 3, 2022).
- Proper implementation of the New Education Policy in the state is necessary. As the teacher-student ratio is concerning, judicious monitoring of the policy must be followed. “The 70:2 ratio in schools is concerning and is tough for the children. It is a problem for both the children and the teachers, as they are also just two teachers.” (Ankita, personal communication, February 3, 2022).

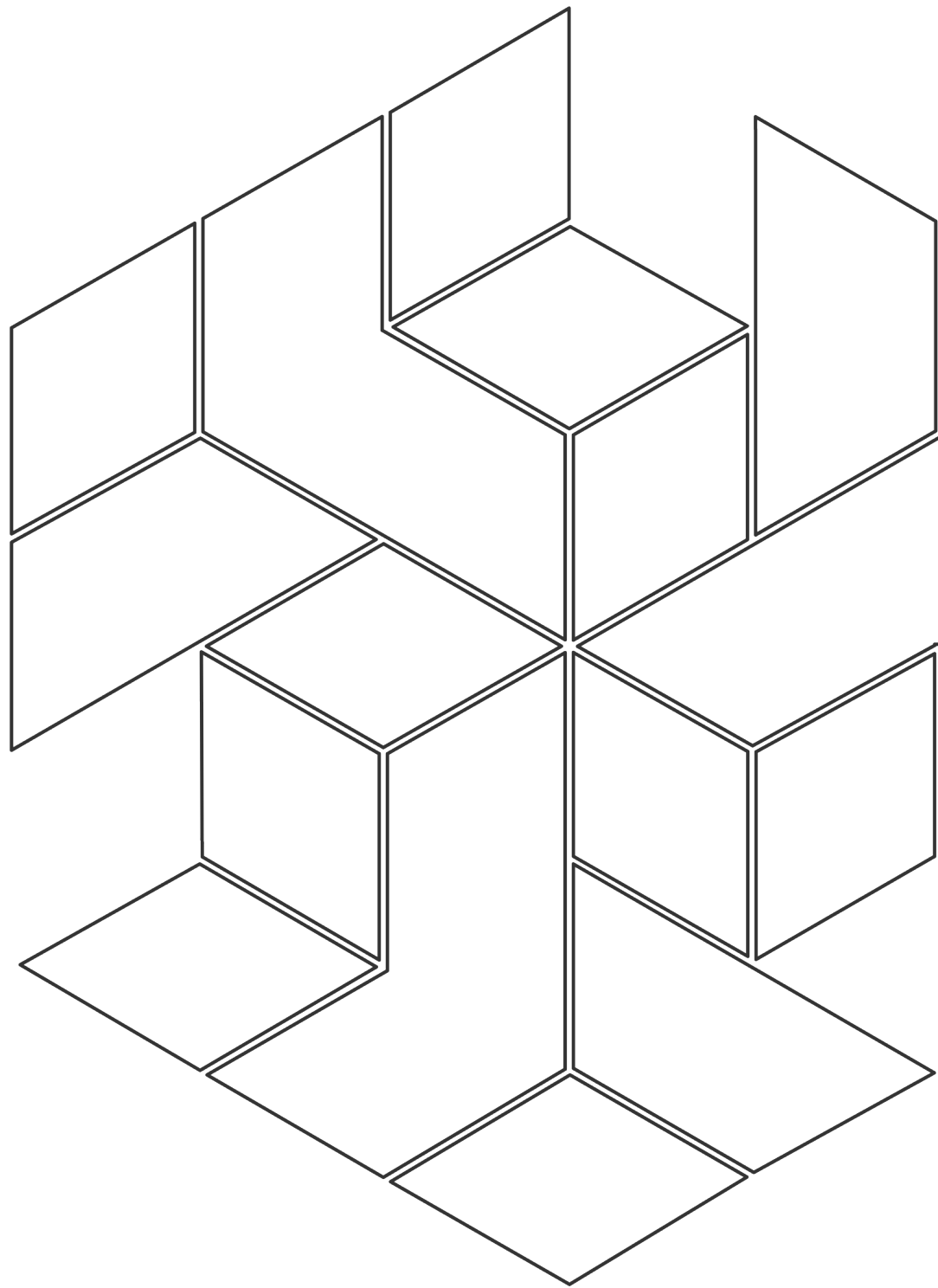
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