



## White asbestos: the silent killer

**A**sbestos, the silent killer, has entrenched itself well into the lives of the poor in India. In effect, the poor have only one choice – a slow and painful death. Despite a worldwide uproar from oncologists and medical practitioners, and condemnation by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), India continues to produce and import tonnes and tonnes of this lethal material.

The government has chosen to be a mute spectator to these deaths. Far from banning this carcinogenic material, the decision-makers are not even bothered to push for environment-friendly substitutes such as steel and clay, giving the impression that legislators wake up only to sudden deaths that involve large numbers, like railway accidents and gas leaks. Asbestos, on the other hand, is a harbinger of slow and painful deaths.

### Effects of asbestos

Asbestos is used in a variety of domestic and industrial applications. In India, it's mainly used either in public utilities such as water pipes, or for construction as roofing sheets. One of the most common types of asbestos is white asbestos.

Asbestos, in all its forms, affects human health by causing incurable lung cancer, and asbestosis. Its poison reaches everyone – from the person mining it, to the ultimate consumer of products containing asbestos. Asbestos dust may be inhaled while drilling a hole, cutting a pipe, repairing or renovating a building, or during demolition.

What makes it even worse is that once the exposure has taken place, merely removing the victim from the site does not limit or arrest the progress of the disease or the risk

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PHOTO: AURELIE DE LALANDE

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## Reassert the local

**S**ustainable Development, Participatory Development, Community Consultation, Local vs Global, North vs South, are some of the classical ways in which various issues of environmental inequities have been framed in the past. This was the language of the NGOs to differentiate their approaches from those easily less sensitive.

However, in the recent past, all such language has found its way into mainstream development agendas and in many ways has lost its original meaning. For example 'development' is now synonymous with 'sustainable' used by all 'stakeholders,' as is 'participation.' On the ground however, the reality has not changed much, and in many cases become more conflicting and indeed violent.

What's in a word, one may counter? Indeed, there can be a lot, for the same words which depicted another reality now appropriate it into the opposite realm, in fact into the very dynamics which they are meant to contest and question. We now need new ways to depict and to communicate. Everyone is a 'stakeholder,' the state, the industry or people. But everyone does not have equal rights; even though the word portrays that this is so.

This is not a case for trivial semantics, but shows the challenge of raising realities in a world where issues of impacted people are increasingly losing public space. The recent critiques of the WSF demonstrated that the 'mainstream' language of engagement with 'another world' is largely cynical, and at best peripheral to globalisation agendas. Local realities have been pushed from being central to being peripheral at best. To make them central once more needs new assertions and new symbols. Are we up to challenging the overwhelming reality of global capital to stop it from subverting the rights of people per se? A creative reassertion of the local is necessary.

*Ravi Agarwal*

*Continued from page 1*

of cancer. The state called asbestosis, mesothelioma or lung cancer can show up even 25-40 years after exposure, as clinical reports reveal. But this has never been disclosed to the workers. Today, only a few workers are aware of the reasons why some of their colleagues never return to work.

### Global reactions

Based on clinically deduced statistics, advised by the WHO and ILO, governments across developed nations have taken cognisance of this hazard and banned the use of asbestos. July 26, 1999, signalled the end of asbestos use throughout all member states of the European Union.

Bans are already in place in more than 30 countries. White asbestos was also the subject of a trade dispute in which the World Trade Organization (WTO) passed a judgment upholding France's decision to ban asbestos imports from Canada in the interests of

public health. Countries such as Canada are promoting occupational and environmental racism. It is unbecoming of a civilised nation to be proved wrong again and again. Canada was found guilty in Europe and will soon be declared so all over the world, since a worldwide ban on asbestos is just a matter of time.

The year 2003 saw the global movement against asbestos gaining ground. There is a consensus emerging in the world to prohibit the use of this toxic fibre. The latest to ban asbestos are Japan and Australia. Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare announced that asbestos would not be manufactured, imported, transferred, provided or used by the country from October 1, 2004.

Unmindful of the fact that poison does not become non-hazardous just because of advertisement and campaigning, the Government of Canada (according to its December 8, 2003 press release) is continuing to support the safe and responsible use of chrysotile asbestos. It has renewed its funding for the Montréal-based Asbestos Institute to promote use of white asbestos in Canada and throughout the world. Even as the Ministry of Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), and the Canada Economic Development (CED) for Quebec Regions announced a contribution of \$775,000, over a three-year period to be administered by NRCan for the promotion of its asbestos, Australia banned all new uses of asbestos and materials containing asbestos from December 31, 2003. It will be illegal under the laws of each state and territory to use, re-use or sell any products containing asbestos, including automotive brake pads and gaskets. The same prohibition applies in the Australian government sector and a customs regulation ban on imports and exports will complement this.

### The Indian situation

However, in India, as always, it is a different story. As per data from the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence & Statis-



PHOTO: AURELIE DE LALANDE



tics, Ministry of Commerce, the country has imported Rs 230 crore worth of asbestos during 2002-03. Canada, Russia and Zimbabwe are continuing to dump white asbestos in India. India consumes more than 125,000 million metric tons of asbestos a year. More than 95 per cent of white asbestos is used annually to manufacture asbestos cement products. Asbestos is being mined in the areas already held under lease but no new lease for mining of asbestos has been granted. The Indian asbestos cement industry is a powerful lobby with an annual turnover of about Rs 2,000 crore.

All forms of asbestos, except white asbestos, are banned in India. In addition to this, consumption of white asbestos in India is largely promoted by government policies and misinformation campaigns. During the last two years, the asbestos industry has been spreading mistruths through massive advertisement campaigns, claiming that it manufactures asbestos products under strictly 'controlled' conditions. Such campaigns are supposed to have us believe that they can control wind erosion and normal wear and tear.

On August 18, 2003, in the Rajya Sabha, the Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare and Parliamentary Affairs, Mrs Sushma Swaraj said, "Studies by the National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH), Ahmedabad, have shown that long-term exposure to any type of asbestos can lead to development of asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma." This shows that the Indian government is aware of the hazards of asbestos, but astonishingly, Indian government representatives in the Rotterdam Convention in Geneva, objected to the extension of a 'Prior Informed Consent' in order to cover for the dangerous white as-

bestos. The amazing reason stated by the Indian officials: "There is no substitute available for asbestos!"

At the Convention, from November 17-21, 2003, Canada and Russia led a revolt of asbestos-producing countries against the inclusion of white asbestos on the international list of chemicals subject to trade control, despite scientific findings that it is harmful for human health and the environment. It is evident that none of these officials have heard of the many substitutes available.

The stance of the Indian government in Geneva is contrary to the interests of Indian workers and citizens, many of whom are contracting asbestos-related diseases. The Indian government must learn from countries of the EU, Chile, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Gambia, Congo, Egypt and Morocco and others, which supported the listing of white asbestos to safeguard public health. There is enough global evidence against white asbestos. There is no need for further proof in order to ban it.

Cellulose fibres, PVA fibres, pyramid fibres and steel can be immediate substitutes to asbestos. While it seems expensive to the buyer, it works out cheaper in the life cycle of the product. Apart from steel, clay roofs, stone tiles and cement can also be used.

### What next?

While there is glaring evidence against chrysotile or white asbestos, do we need to wait for more?

Phased reduction and a ban on the mining and use of asbestos are a must. If the government is really concerned about its citizens' health, it must promote these alternatives of asbestos under the Innovative Stream for Rural Housing and Development, in response to Maharashtra's request for using asbestos sheets. The Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) and Building Materials and Technology Promotion Council (BMTPC), which are supposed to provide technical comments, ought to tune themselves to the health hazards of asbestos to enable health-friendly housing. The Government of India should take immediate steps to minimise future exposure of asbestos to the poor and rich alike, to all the citizens of the country and, furthermore, encourage the use of substitutes.

*Gopal Krishna*

## FEATURES

### Public takes 'waste' into its own hands

About 40 organisations and individuals came together at Bangalore, from December 12-14, 2003, to form the Alliance for Waste Management (AWM). This alliance is a result of an initiative by Toxics Link to bring together different NGOs and individuals working on solid waste management issues across the country. The alliance is a response from civil society organisations and individuals to help solve the problem of municipal solid waste in India.

Most of these people have a vast reservoir of knowledge and experience, which has gone unacknowledged and unnoticed by the local and central government.

In recent years, due to the rapid pace of unplanned urbanisation in India, the problem of municipal solid waste has become acute. Though waste management is part and parcel of a citizen's daily routine, urban planners have completely ignored the fact that it is one of the basic tenets of a planning process. India produces nearly 40 million tonnes of waste per annum and it is likely to triple in the next 20 years. With the lack of space in the already over-expanded cities, the unscientific and environmentally dangerous practice of open dumping of waste in landfills won't remain an option. It needs to be mentioned here that urban waste management is an obligatory function of municipalities in India. This aspect of civic administration has not got due attention from the authorities.

The civic bodies have failed to perform their duties adequately. As a result, they often fall under legal or public pressure and have had to opt for indiscriminate privatisation of waste collection and dumping, without any thought to environmental consequences. Today, however, managing a city needs new skills, fresh approaches and new structures. Existing laws – which were actually designed for smaller cities in the 1950s – are an impediment to any initiative to bring about structural changes. Hence, in crisis situations, the first response of the municipality is to pass on waste responsibility to a centralised private operator, as in the case of Onyx in Chennai. Of-



[Please amend caption] -- Collaborative members, South.

ten, this is done in the form of a sub-contract, and it essentially still remains a municipal function. Most times, there are hardly any attempts to involve other stakeholders in a meaningful way.

There are several communities across the country that have taken the initiative collecting waste from door-to-door and segregating it. In some cases, they have even negotiated to obtain land for local composting of organic materials, reducing the quantity of waste by up to 80 per cent. But such initiatives have usually gone unnoticed and have had no legal status. In many cases, successful initiatives have been wiped out when the municipality has chosen to bring in a private operator instead of incorporating the community programme into the city system.

Conceptually, there are ranges of options and alternate possibilities – from completely privatised centralised systems, to decentralised local community-based initiatives (which are owned and operated locally by service agencies). Another approach is to create wider partnerships with community organisations, marketing agencies for compost sales, recyclers, as well as the land authority to legitimise local land use for composting. But such objectives cannot be realised without the active push of the local, state and central governments.

There are several successful community waste management systems operating in

different cities in India but their replication and enhancement remains a big question.

It was in this context that Toxics Link took the initiative of bringing together the experts and organised a collaborative workshop focussing on waste issues. The first of the series of three workshops was held in Bangalore from December 12-14, 2003.

It was during this workshop that a decision to form an Alliance for Waste Management was taken. The alliance is “a network of voluntary organisations, community groups, professional organisations and interested persons committed to working on environmentally sustainable solid waste management and moving towards the concept of Zero Waste Management”.

Its secretariat would be based in Chennai, with Sultan Ahmad Ismail, Director, Ecoscience Foundation, Chennai, as the chairperson of the working group till the next workshop. The working group consists of seven members: Sanjay K. Gupta (Toxics Link), T.K. Ramkumar (Exnora International), Anselm Rosario (Waste Wise), Dr Vivek Agarwal (Centre for Development Communication), S.R. Dixit (Jana Seva Ashram), and Jyoti Mhapsekar (Stree Mukti Sangathan). The second workshop will be held in Mumbai, in May.

The AWM is to work as a policy advocacy group, and would try to provide and promote sustainable decentralised solid waste management practices across the country.

*Sanjay K. Gupta and Indrajeet Rai*

## Chemical safety takes centrestage at Bangkok meetings

In the two weeks between November 1-13, three crucial meetings were held in Bangkok under the banner of ‘Chemical Safety in a Vulnerable World’. The three meetings included:

- ▲ Forum IV of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS)
- ▲ The International Persistent Organic Pollutants Elimination Network General Assembly (IPEN GA)
- ▲ The First Preparatory Committee for the Strategic Approach on International Chemical Management (SAICM PREPCOM1)

Forum IV of the IFCS, which was held from November 1-7, 2003, set the tone for much of the discussions that followed. The IFCS is a broad consensus-building mechanism that serves as a facilitator and advocate with the aim of bringing order to global actions taken in the interest of global chemical safety. It functions as an accountability mechanism for its participants.

The two key areas addressed in the discussions that followed the Forum were the growing concerns over Acutely Toxic Pesticides (ATPs) and the needs of vulnerable sub-populations such as children.

The discussions over ATPs and what to do about them focussed on the workshop on ATPs prepared by the agricultural chemical association, Croplife. Based on the data procured from the National Health Incidence in Thailand and Brazil, Croplife claimed that the real problem with ATPs was not their regular use but the practice of ‘self harm’. Therefore, they concluded that there was no pressing need to address ATPs. The delegate from Thailand (a past president of the IFCS) vehemently responded to this conclusion by stating that the real number of poisonings caused by pesticides was unknown and what Croplife had quoted was simply “the tip of the tip of the iceberg”.

The Thai delegate presented data from approximately 280,000 Thai farmers tested in the year 2000, showing that around 18 per cent had cholinesterase impairment. He accused Croplife of misquoting the data in

its self-interest, and of “serious scientific uncredibility”. He called for IFCS to revise their association with this “non-credible and unscientific organisation”!

This intervention was followed by similar criticisms from Brazil and the World Health Organization (WHO), who stated categorically that the current poisoning figures did not adequately reflect the real-world situation, and therefore should not be used to justify non-action on ATPs.

The second priority issue was children’s health and the special needs of vulnerable sub-populations. This was discussed through a positive workshop co-hosted by national children’s health organisations including paediatricians from IPEN and WHO. Everyone present resolved to support vulnerable sub-populations like children. Looking at the positive side, the International Chemical Companies Association (ICCA) stated that children were unable to break down certain toxic chemicals into their more toxic metabolites and this, in turn, protected them from certain hazardous exposures.

The SAICM meeting was held from November 9-13, 2003. Emanating from the IPEN General Assembly was the IPEN Bangkok SAICM Statement. As non-governmental public interest organisations working to protect the public and workers’ health and the environment from harm caused by toxic chemicals, participants confirmed their commitment to work towards the elimination of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and other persistent toxic substances from the world’s environment.

The IPEN Bangkok statement attempted to set the direction of the SAICM and was successful to some degree in guiding the discussions.

Through the week, several NGOs including Greenpeace International conducted a survey of participants to elicit their

views on three key issues:

▲ Should chemicals with certain characteristics be phased out?

▲ Should the provision of data on effects on human health and the environment be a precondition to a chemical being produced or used?

▲ Is there a need for a liability mechanism?

The overwhelming majority of countries answered “Yes” to all three questions, with some notable exceptions including Australia, Argentina and Russia. The Australian delegate stated they were complex questions, which could not be answered with a simple yes or no.

By the time these meetings concluded, the members present were able to draw up a number of concise conclusions. Some of them are as follows:

▲ Without the active support of the public interest environment, health and worker NGOs, it is likely that very little will be achieved in the realm of chemical safety.

▲ The powerful chemical industry will not give up any profits lightly. They are using the country’s national data to argue that there is no need for immediate and priority action on hazardous substances and are overstepping their limits.

▲ NGOs must be able to counter the growing push of risk assessment proponents, and they must be able to support their claim against those who believe that the only problem is inappropriate use of chemicals rather than the inherently hazardous nature of the substances.

▲ Countries have finally accepted that children are not simply little adults but are a precious and vulnerable sub-population that needs to be protected against the powerful and the oppressive.

▲ While we can often agree on the words to include, rarely do we all agree on their meaning. Precaution, safety, uncertainty, the right to know and even science all have a wide range of meanings to different stakeholders. Perhaps this is one reason why, in some countries, a chemical that is considered hazardous is elsewhere put in the hands of unprotected and illiterate workers who are unaware of the dangers.

*Papiya Sarkar*

For more information on the events mentioned, visit: <http://www.who.int/ifcs/>

## Cuddalore opposes Chemplast-Sanmar PVC facility

The proposal for setting up a PVC manufacturing facility by Chemplast-Sanmar, a chemical and plastics major based in Chennai, faced stiff opposition from the communities at Cuddalore, where it was to be located. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank Group was supposed to partly finance this project. This, however, was dropped after the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman entertained a complaint from local organisations and representatives of the local communities.

As a result, the company was forced to withdraw from Cuddalore. Subsequently, Chemplast’s search for an alternate site ended with the Andhra Pradesh government offering a site at Krishnapatnam village (henceforth referred to as KPN), 25 kilometres from Nellore. The new proposal at KPN is capable of manufacturing 1,70,000 TPA (tonne per annum) of PVC and 1,00,000 TPA of ethylene dichloride.

If Cuddalore was seen as a success, then there is more good news for environmentalists. The public hearing that was held on November 19 at KPN village saw a vociferous public outcry against the proposed facility. About 1,500 locals attended the hearing, mostly from the villages in and around KPN. Panchayat leaders, other village heads, community representatives and representatives of political parties voiced their unanimous opposition against the setting up of this facility, citing potentially serious impacts on their environment and livelihood. The opposition was extremely overwhelming and was consoled only after a senior member of the public hearing panel promised to take their public message: ‘No to PVC’, to the appropriate authority.

Toxics Link, through a submission to the Public Hearing panel, also raised objections based on the fact that PVC production emits Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). They were also informed that India is committed to reduce POPs under the oath made at the Stockholm Convention. Earlier, an NGO coalition comprising the Movement for Sustainable Development headed by Jana Vignana Vedika (Nellore),



## PVC: its raw materials, and their effects

Most of the raw materials involved in the production of PVC are hazardous and toxic.

- ▲ **Ethylene** is a highly flammable substance. Its transportation and storage pose the threat of explosion and fire.
- ▲ **Chlorine** smells like powerful bleaching powder and is a corrosive gas that irritates the nose, eyes and throat. Excessive irritation or exposure to chlorine can damage lung tissues to cause *oedema* – an often fatal condition where lungs fill up with fluid drowning the victim. Experimental evidence from animal studies indicates that chlorine causes genetic and reproductive damage, including effects on future generations. Because it is a very reactive gas, it combines readily with a variety of chemicals present in its surroundings to form deadlier poisons and hence presents a significant transportation and storage risk.
- ▲ **Ethylene di-chloride (EDC)** was earlier used as a pesticide, though most of its use in this application is now severely restricted or banned because of its cancer-causing potential. EDC is known to cause cancer among laboratory animals and is a suspected human carcinogen. Breathing ethylene di-chloride can irritate the eyes, nose, throat and lungs causing coughing, shortness of breath and difficulty in breathing. Exposure can cause nausea, vomiting, headaches, increasing drowsiness and then loss of consciousness. Higher levels can cause pulmonary *oedema* and liver and kidney damage. EDC, which easily enters ground and surface waters, can cause genetic damage that can be passed on to the next generation.
- ▲ **Vinyl Chloride Monomer (VCM)** is linked to the dissolving of bones, a symptom noticed among workers exposed to this chemical in the factory. Studies indicate that workers exposed to VCM have a higher risk of falling prey to liver, lung and brain cancers and skin tumours. VCM may also cause genetic damage which is hereditary. In the event of a disaster, the VCM gas (which is explosive and poisonous) can envelop surrounding villages.

*Excerpted from Say NO to Chemplast PVC, Nityanand Jayaraman, Forum for Corporate Accountability and Environmental Health, 2003*

Forum for Better Hyderabad (Hyderabad), assisted by the Forum for Corporate Accountability and Environmental Health (Chennai) and Toxics Link (Chennai), exposed several flaws in the Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment (REIA).

For instance, the noise level data for this report had been lifted from the EIA for Cuddalore, which was the earlier site. In the absence of appropriate information provided by the EIA, “informed” public opinion regarding the project can never be sought. The submission of such fraudulent documents symbolises a mere mockery of the due government processes of public hearings. This is a notorious trend that is now being imitated in several other major

industrial proposals, resulting in dangerous consequences like the Bhopal disaster. The flaws in the REIA were presented to the District Collector and the public hearing panel by Dr Babu Rao, a senior chemical engineer, of the All India Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, Scientific Workers Association, on behalf of the Movement for Sustainable Development.

### **Mettur: toxic exposure tour**

On November 1, 2003, a team of 15 people led by Tamil Nadu Green Movement, Forum for Corporate Accountability and Environmental Health and Toxics Link (Chennai) visited the villages around Chemplast’s existing site at Mettur in the

Salem district of Tamil Nadu. The team included representatives of communities from KPN and NGOs.

Interaction with local communities revealed problems of extensive groundwater contamination and air pollution in the area. Expansion of the facility during the past several years has led to severe environmental impacts. A Greenpeace sampling around Chemplast in 1999 revealed the presence of dioxin precursors. This tour helped KPN communities understand the potential problem if a new PVC facility is set up.

*Rajesh Rangarajan*

## UPDATES

### COMMUNITIES AND WASTE UPDATE

#### Initial steps to a clean capital

After successfully facilitating community-based solid waste management projects in two resettlement colonies of Delhi, Toxics Link, Delhi, is now implementing a waste management project in Sarita Vihar, a higher middle-income residential colony in South Delhi.

In the first phase of the project, Toxics Link will work with 2,500 households (out of the total of 6,000 households). For the purpose, Toxics Link has brought together registered associations like Residents’ Welfare Associations (RWAs), Mahila Mandal, Kitchen Garden Association and others on a common platform for implementing community-based solid waste management programmes. This has enabled them to overlook internal differences and has encouraged teamwork.

The municipality has also demonstrated eagerness to participate in the programme. A Coordination Committee has been formed, consisting of volunteers from residential pockets of the target area and zonal/site level staff of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), under the supervision of the MCD (Central Zone) Deputy Commissioner, Punya Srivastava.

The Coordination Committee includes departments such as MCD – Works, Sanitation, Horticulture and Ministry of Conservation of Forests in particular. The committee has decided to meet on the 30th of every month at a permanent venue to up-

## IS A MORE INFORMATIVE PIC POSSIBLE?



PHOTO: SANJAY GUPTA

[Please amend caption] -- Tanya Sengupta of Toxics Link coordinating the meeting.

date the officials about the prevailing sanitation-related problems of the area and to jointly find suitable solutions to these.

The members of the Coordination Committee met for the first time on December 30, 2003, and discussed issues like the need for regular cleaning of community dustbins and proper disposal of horticultural waste.

Ten members from Municipal Corporation of Delhi and 35 representatives from the target area were present in the session. The next meeting is scheduled to be held on January 30, 2004, and is expected to have better participation from the residents and municipal staffs for greater impact on the city's solid waste management plans.

*Tanya Sengupta*

### Solid waste management in Delhi – a social vulnerability study

Management of burgeoning solid wastes has become a critical issue for almost all the major cities of India. Although the responsibility of solid waste management lies primarily with the municipal bodies, several other stakeholder groups play significant roles in this process.

In the Indian scenario, the so-called waste-pickers who come from a highly unstable social background, play a unique role. Waste pickers eke out a living by collecting and selling recyclable materials out of municipal solid wastes. In the process, they make a significant contribution to environmental management in different metropo-

lises over and above rendering a service to the local economy.

The paper presented by Papiya Sarkar of Toxics Link at the Third International Conference on Environment and Health organised by Karnataka Environment Research Foundation (Bangalore) and University of Madras (Chennai), was on the vulnerability study of the waste pickers of Delhi with a focus on their socio-economic and occupational health aspects.

The paper made use of the findings of a survey conducted by Srishti (an environmental group) from June 2001 to January 2002 to elucidate the socio-economic profile of the waste pickers including their working conditions, and their problems and expectations. The database was of 198 waste pickers who were interviewed from different parts of the city between 10 am and 4 pm. Further, relevant policies of the Delhi Government were examined to assess its understanding of the overall role of the waste pickers, and to explore the concerns and commitments of the government towards them.

Recommendations were made to enhance the efficiency of government ventures in addressing the basic problems of the waste pickers – deplorable working conditions, poor returns, exploitation and everyday harassment. Suggestions were given to improve the design of policy initiatives aimed at integrating waste collection and disposal incorporating the employment needs of the urban poor and migrants with adequate attention to occupational health.

*Papiya Sarkar*

ing their way to the Indian soil.” The bench viewed the case based on the recommendations of a high-powered committee headed by former Science and Technology Minister M.G.K. Menon, in a petition filed by the Research Foundation for Science and Technology.

The matter had gone to court in 1995 after it was pointed out that India was a signatory to the Basel Convention on the control of trans-boundary movement of hazardous wastes and their disposal (1989). India had ratified the Convention in 1992



PHOTO: P. MADHAVAN

### Supreme Court takes action on dumping of hazwaste

Due to the blatant violation of the ban imposed on the import of hazardous waste to India, the Supreme Court directed the authorities to re-export or destroy these waste material consignments lying at various ports. The disposal of waste material must be done with an efficiency of 99.9 per cent and in a work atmosphere free from environmental and health hazards.

A Supreme Court Bench composed of Justices Y.K. Sabharwal and B.N. Aggarwal, said, “There cannot be any question of permitting these consignments mak-

when it was realised that hazardous wastes were being dumped unceremoniously on Indian shores in the name of recycling. The bulk of these wastes came from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia. The Supreme Court had, in 1997, banned the import of hazardous material.

Accepting the arguments of the petitioner's counsel Sanjay Parikh and CPCB counsel Vijay Panjwani, the Bench said the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and the State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) should be provided with requisite power and infrastructure so that they could frame guidelines and monitor their implementation.

*Kishore Wankhede*



PLEASE ADD UPDATED INFORMATION (1 PARA)

## PUBLIC LECTURE UPDATE

### Who, really, is the enemy?

On December 19, 2003, two decades after the Bhopal disaster, Toxics Link in collaboration with the IIC, recalled the inhuman tragedy which shook the country so violently.

'Imaging Bhopal' put on display a unique collection of photographs taken by world-renowned photographer Raghu Rai. From the swollen corpse of the baby, which was featured in several magazines, to the forgotten, homeless and injured who have been left to fend for themselves, Raghu Rai managed to capture all their woes.

In a moment of confession he admitted that his initial photographs were a result of the predatory nature of his journalistic curiosity. But inspired by Mother Teresa and other social workers, he abandoned his neutral stance and resolved to help the situation.

With the aid of his camera he was able to portray to the world the enormous pain and trauma caused by this outstanding example of corporate irresponsibility. Joined by Professor Suroopa Mukherji and Dr Usha Ramanathan, Raghu Rai entered into a panel discussion at the end of his slide show.

Aghast at the pictures they had witnessed, the audience had varied questions and comments, to which the panel responded patiently. The discussion was centred on the issue of corporate liability and responsibility in dealing with a mishap of such great magnitude.

"Every one has made money out of it, including our government." This shocking statement not only stunned its listeners into silence but it also highlighted the appalling moral condition of the leaders of our country. The discussion ended on the note of an even greater anxiety: that if the destruction of Bhopal could have been avoided, but wasn't due to the corrupt motives of our leaders, then, *who, really, is the enemy?*

*Anne Marie Prayas*

Pictures courtesy **Raghu Rai**,  
Greenpeace, Magnum Photos



*Top: Foetuses, Bhopal 2002. Foetuses aborted during and shortly after the gas leak were preserved by Dr Satpathy, a forensic expert at the state government's Hamidia Hospital, to establish the cause of death.*

*Right: Champadevi Shukla, Bhopal 2001.*

*Champadevi Shukla is one of the 73 women employed at a stationery centre for gas victims run by the state government. "My son Dinesh, daughter Aneeta, and grand-daughter Sapna – all have some gas-related problems."*

*Below: Tal-ul-Masajid and montage of victims, Bhopal 2001. Tal-ul-Masajid is among the biggest mosques in South Asia. Most of the surviving victims and the dead were brought to the only functioning state government hospital, across the road. The photos are part of the collection of Dr Satpathy.*





*Left: Justice A.M. Ahmadi. Justice Ahmadi, who opposed the majority decision of the bench to extinguish Union Carbide’s criminal liability for the disaster. On becoming the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, he changed the charge from murder to culpable homicide not amounting to murder. After retirement, he started presiding over a trust that runs a hospital for the victims. He has this job for a lifetime.*

*Above: Sukhdev Dubey, Bhopal 2002. “He just had a bout of coughing that left him quite restless and shaken. He has such attacks quite frequently in the day, and even at night he gets up because of these attacks. His lungs have not been normal since the gas leak,” says a resident doctor at the Patient in Bhopal Memorial Hospital.*

*Left below: Burial of an unknown child, Bhopal 1984. This unknown child has become the icon of the world’s worst industrial disaster, caused by the US chemical company, Union Carbide. No one knows his parents, and no one has ever come forward to ‘claim’ this photograph.*

*Below: Skulls, Bhopal 2001. Skulls discarded after research at the Hamidia Hospital. Medical experts believe that the Methyl Isocyanate gas inhaled by the people of Bhopal may have affected the brain.*



## Dry days ahead for Coke

In a major blow to soft drink major Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Ltd, Kerala High Court directed the company to stop drawing groundwater for use in its bottling plant at Plachimedu in Palakaad district by January 16, 2004. The court also directed the Perumatty Gram Panchayat, under whose jurisdiction the Coke plant is located, and the state government to ensure that the plant does not extract groundwater after the specified time limit expires.

“Groundwater under the land of the company does not belong to it. Normally, every land owner can draw ‘reasonable’ amounts of groundwater which is necessary for its domestic and agricultural requirements. But here, 510 kilolitres of water is extracted per day, converted to products and transported, thus breaking the natural water cycle,” Justice K. Balakrishnan Nair observed while delivering the judgment on a petition filed by the panchayat.



Extraction of groundwater, even up to the admitted limit by the company, was ‘illegal’, the court held. The company had no legal right to extract this much natural wealth and the panchayat and the government were bound to prevent it.

The court held that the groundwater belongs to the general public and the company had no right to it. The government also has no power to allow a private party to extract huge quantities of groundwater.

Justice Nair also directed the panchayat to ensure that all wells, including borewells, of the company were closed down in a month from now, failing which the panchayat would not renew the company’s licence.

Source: <http://in.rediff.com/money/2003/dec/16cola1.htm>

## ‘Sammelan’ – the refuge for silicosis victims

To bring the problem of silicosis to the forefront and find a solution to it, ‘Sammelan’ was organised on December 16, 2003 at Khambat in Gujarat. Present at this meeting was a group of over 350 people including silicosis sufferers, widows, orphaned youth, employers, government officers and concerned citizens.

For the very first time, victims were given a platform to narrate their side of the story and the result was overwhelming. Widows and orphans broke down while recalling a painful past of hunger, poverty and rejection. For some of them, this brutality was in the present!

The problem of silicosis-related premature deaths was traced to the absence of dust extraction systems in the industry. Employers complained that while they tried to install safer technology, it was often economically unviable for them to continue due to huge electricity bills. The MLA present was requested to address the matter of a subsidy to the Gujarat Electricity Board, on behalf of the industrial owners.

The Chief Guest, MLA Shirish Shukla, said what pained him most was the condition of the widows. He said, “Workers, not only in Shakerpur or Vadawa are affected, but I remember my neighbours in Khambat city who were engaged in agate grinding... one by one, they all died.” He said he has forwarded a proposal to develop ‘Agate Park’ on the same lines as ‘Diamond Park’ in Surat. He further added that the



PHOTOS: JAGDISH PATEL



Top: Chief Guest S. Shukla (MLA) speaking on the issue. Above: Mukesh, a silicosis victim, appeals for a safer system.

government would not allow employers to kill their workers in this manner.

The meeting concluded on a note of strong resolution by the political leaders to do everything in their capacity to stop the alarming growth of silicosis deaths.

**Jagdish B. Patel**

## No ban on Danish can

To help protect the environment from unnecessary littering, Denmark had launched a new deposit-and-return system for packaged drinks in 2003. In its very first year of operation, this system witnessed recovery rates of 81 per cent for beer and soft drink cans and 90 per cent for glass bottles.

“The figures show once and for all that the return system has accomplished its most important task: protecting the environment,” Environment Minister Hans-Christian



Schmidt said in a statement. Mr Schmidt also added that it was noteworthy to see a sharp rise in the retail sales of canned and bottled brands of beer. The number of varieties of beer on this offer had also increased from 350 to 550.

For many years before this system was introduced, disposable containers for certain kinds of drinks were prohibited in Denmark in order to protect the market share of refillables. The government decided to lift the “can ban” under legal pressure.

Source: Environment Daily 1564, 01/12/03

## AWARDS

### India made proud

Every year, the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) honours individuals who excel in the field of conservation biology. This year two of the awardees include Bittu Sahgal and Dr A.J.T. Johnsingh.

Bittu Sahgal, Editor, *Sanctuary* magazine, has been awarded the Distinguished Service Award under the category 'Education and Journalism' for "his illustrious contribution to educating generations of Indians about preserv-



*Bittu Sahgal*

ing their global natural heritage".

Dr A.J.T. Johnsingh, Wildlife Institute of India, has been awarded the Distinguished Service Award under the category 'Government' for "his exemplary contributions to the conservation of mammals and forests in South Asia through leadership, guidance and inspiration".

The SCB is an international professional organisation dedicated to promoting the scientific study of the phenomena that affect the maintenance, loss and restoration of biological diversity. Its membership includes a wide range of people interested in the conservation and study of biological diversity, ranging from resource managers and educators to government workers and students. Besides educating the public and promoting research, the society strives to recognise outstanding contributions to the field made by individuals and organisations.

### IFCS Award

The Standing Committee of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS) decided to present a Special Recognition Award at Forum IV to recognise those contributing in an exceptional way to a special chemical topic or activity. The

award is different from the Award of Merit, which recognises outstanding contributions on a global scale of a broader scope and nature.

The Special Recognition Award for 2003 has gone to the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN).

IPEN is a global network of public interest non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in support of a common goal of eliminating persistent organic pollutants (POPs). Through its effective mobilising and coordination of more than 350 public health, consumer, environmental, and other NGOs in 65 countries, IPEN contributed much to the successful negotiations of the Stockholm POPs Convention. Raising awareness among the public and involvement of public-interest NGOs was a crucial element for the acceptance and successful completion of the negotiations. IPEN was a key driving force in this task.

Since formal negotiations of the Stockholm Convention were completed in 2001, IPEN has continued to play a central role in international POPs work and has been a significant force in encouraging countries to ratify and implement the Stockholm Convention.

## RESOURCES

### SPECIALISED TRAINING IN WASTE MANAGEMENT

The Communities and Waste team of Toxics Link, Delhi, has developed some Information Education and Communication (IEC) material as part of its waste management initiative in Sarita Vihar, south Delhi.

The material includes flyers on 'How to become a Zero Waste Community by implementing Supreme Court rulings on Waste Management', which have been printed in both English and Hindi.

Three flip charts are being designed and developed in such a way that each serves as a step forward in presenting a complete picture of effective

community-based solid waste management. The first flip chart aims at 'Community Mobilisation for Decentralised Waste Management System', the second focusses on 'Composting Methods', and the last is on 'The Road to Good Waste Management'. The flip charts are meant to serve as training tools for community trainers and fresh-

ers in this field. The first flip chart has already been produced and is being used to train domestic helpers, private waste collectors, MCD sanitation staff, etc.

Calendars for 2004 have been printed and are being circulated among residents of Sarita Vihar. The calendars emphasise the importance of source segregation, specifying elements that fall under the category of recyclable and organic wastes. A door-to-door awareness campaign on the importance of source segregation has also been undertaken to educate housewives and other members of the local community.

*Tanya Sengupta*



For copies of the flyer and calendar, contact Tanya Sengupta at Toxics Link; e-mail [tanya@toxicslink.org](mailto:tanya@toxicslink.org)

## One-day national workshop on e-waste management

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) will organise a one-day national workshop on March 15, 2004, on 'Electronic Waste Management', at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, in collaboration with GTZ and Toxics Link.

An effort would be made to bring together the electronics and computer industries, government officials, activists, international experts, NGOs, community groups and the media to discuss the status of e-waste management and work out policies and interventions for its improvement.

The aim of the workshop is to generate ideas and strategies, to interact and share knowledge, and to discuss and devise viable solutions to manage the problem of e-waste in India.

The direct outcome of the meeting would be a set of recommendations for a national policy on management of e-waste.



## Toxics Dispatch to be available in Tamil soon

In an attempt to include more information from different parts of the country as well as to reach out to different language speaking readers, a beginning is being made by incorporating and experimenting with a Tamil version of Toxics Dispatch, starting next issue onwards.

This is to cater to specific information requests made to us during our interaction with our partner groups and individuals based in southern India.

We look forward to your valuable suggestions and feedback. Your contributions to the newsletter will help in mutual exchange of information and awareness.



## E-toxic listserve

Toxics Link coordinates an electronic discussion group for sharing and disseminating information. If you would like to join the group, please e-mail us at [tdelhi@vsnl.com](mailto:tdelhi@vsnl.com)

## FACT FILE

### Killer mosquitoes or killer mosquito repellents?

The most commonly used mosquito repellent, the mosquito coil, is not as useful as it is thought to be. Studies have shown that the amount of formaldehyde released on the burning of one coil equals that of 51 cigarettes, and the amount of fine particles released equals the burning of 75-137 cigarettes.

Epidemiological studies reveal that long-term exposure to mosquito coil smoke may induce asthma and persistent wheezing in children.

Besides formaldehydes, the study has identified several other compounds emitted by the burning coil. These include fine particles, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), aldehydes and ketones. Long term exposure to the compounds – even at trace levels – could increase cancer risk. The study was conducted for six brands of mosquito coils commonly used in China and Malaysia.



Since the coils are made to have very inefficient combustion, large amounts of products of incomplete combustion are released from burning coils.

A comparison of the pollutant concentrations from the coils with those resulting from biomass fuel combustion reveals that people exposed to smoke from mosquito coils (even for a few years) are in greater danger of contracting respiratory infections than those exposed to biomass smoke for an entire lifetime.

Source: Environment Health Perspectives, Vol 111, Number 12, Sep 2003; compiled by **Ruchita Khurana**

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