

## Mercury in our backyard

MEENA SUBRAMANIAM

December 3 is observed as Global Day of Action against Corporate Crime. This year let's take a look at what happened in Kodaikanal.

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*"People, productivity, profit." — Lee Iacocca*

Today, almost every multinational corporation bases its activity on the above principle. Human life is cheap and the recipients of toxic processes inhabit the entire "third world". This remains so even 20 years after the world's worst chemical disaster — the Bhopal Gas tragedy in 1984.

This year holds historical value for the pretty hill station of Kodaikanal, which became the recipient of a mercury-based clinical thermometer factory, of Ponds Cheseborough Ltd.

### Mercury in the yard

Mercury, in its elemental form, was imported from Bethlehem Apparatus, Hellertown, PA18055, U.S. The machinery and equipment came from a defunct factory in Watertown, U.S. By the 1990s, the company — Pond's Cheseborough was acquired by the multinational

giant, Unilever and its Indian subsidiary, Hindustan Lever Ltd. By 1997, production reached a whopping 1,25,000 thermometers!

In March 2001, the local community made a startling discovery at the local scrap yard, located in a congested locality. Mercury laden, broken glass tubes in sacks, were found piled in a corner of the open yard. The mercury bearing scrap, some 7.4 tonnes when weighed, had been sold by the company to the scrap yard dealer over a period of four years.

The irate community immediately purchased the scrap as circumstantial evidence and informed the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board, who immediately issued a notice of closure. After initially denying it was their scrap, the management later admitted that scrap from their premises had "inadvertently been sold"!

The Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board ordered that some 416 tonnes of mercury bearing scrap be shipped back to Bethlehem Apparatus for mercury recovery. The community also got the guarantee that none of the recovered mercury would be allowed back to India.

### Kept in ignorance

After 18 years, ailing ex-workers, who have been exposed to perilous levels of vaporising and elemental mercury, staked their right to know why they had never been informed that mercury was a lethal poison. (An Independent Peoples Tribunal Hearing was held in September 2002 at Kodaikanal to redress health problems of the ex-workers.) The mercury they had handled had even been taken home on their clothes, contaminating their families and children. Medical test records were not made available in their entirety and neither was anyone informed of any safety measures or precautions, even though they had been in contact with one of the deadliest toxins known to human beings.

The next year, Greenpeace Labs and the Department of Atomic Energy, Government of India — in two separate bio monitoring studies — published research findings on the levels of atmospheric mercury and methylating mercury being released in Kodaikanal as abnormally high. The water from the Pambar that flows below the factory feeds the Vaigai Dam and, is a major lifeline for the Periakulam township, the Madurai Basin and subsequently, the Bay of Bengal.

### Victory and justice

In September 2004, performing the role of an apex court, the Supreme Court-appointed Hazardous Waste Monitoring Committee visited Kodaikanal to assess the damage and liability from such an industry.

The verdict is a victory for the community and ex-workers of Kodaikanal, directing both eco remediations to the environment as well as suggesting that there may be a suitable health package evolved for the affected. The serious nature of this kind of contamination primarily requires a long-term epidemiological health study as ex-workers have been exposed to some of the highest levels of mercury, which the company continues to deny.

Almost all multinational corporations weave their magic web of economic security to churn out huge profits for themselves and their shareholders. Most of their products do not specify the processes, chemicals or the resultant waste stream.

As Western countries phase out their hazardous technologies, Indian companies and subsidiaries absorb such obsolete technology, lie to their shareholders and expose communities and natural resources to such long-term toxic burdens.

If we want to do something about the powerful institutions and individuals that shape our lives, we need to educate ourselves about their culture of criminality — and the public efforts to bring them to justice.

### **What can I do?**

- Write letters to the Chairperson, TNPCB, Guindy, Anna Salai, Chennai, thanking and congratulating them.
- Write letters to The Chairman, Hindustan Lever Ltd., Back Bay Reclamation, Mumbai, demanding that they:
  - Publicly apologise for suppressing the truth from citizens and shareholders thus evading corporate accountability and transparency.
  - Act as per the directive of the Supreme Court without delay.
  - Provide truthful information on chemicals and toxins in all their products, including cosmetics, foods and packaging.
    - Write letters to: Mr. A Raja, Union Minister of Environment and Forests, New Delhi, demanding the complete phasing out of mercury bearing products in India.
    - Start a safe environment campaign in your school labs to advocate safe handling and disposal of mercury.

For more information visit: [www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org) [www.scorecard.org](http://www.scorecard.org),  
[www.studentsforbhopal.org/](http://www.studentsforbhopal.org/)

*In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group*