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EXPORT OF INDUSTRIAL HAZARDS TO INDIA

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Industrial Hazards Exported to India

Barry I Castleman

Rakesh Madan

Robert Mayes

ASBESTOS is the name for a family of fibrous minerals that have found widespread use in industry over the past century. This is due to asbestos' excellent resistance to heat and chemicals and its tensile strength. In 1977, eleven facilities produced 420,000 tons of asbestos-cement (A-C) sheet and 81,000 tons of A-C pipe in India [1]. There were more than one million tons of A-C pipe produced in the US in 1980, but A-C sheet is hardly used at all in the US anymore (about 70,000 tons in 1980).

Asbestos readily breaks down into a microscopic dust when handled, and unfortunately the inhalation of asbestos fibres is extremely hazardous. British and American medical authorities published reports of fatal asbestosis (a scarring of the lungs) in the early 1930s, among workers with as little as 6 to 9 months of heavy exposure to the dust. The disease does not usually manifest itself in less than 10 years from the onset of exposure, and in its early stages the main symptom is shortness of breath upon exertion. The shortness of breath can eventually become incapacitating and lead to death. There is no cure for asbestosis, and the only hope lies in preventing workers from having to breathe the dust in the first place. D B Banerji has found high concentrations of airborne asbestos dust and diagnosed asbestosis in one-quarter of the workers (with more than five years on the job) examined in an asbestos-cement plant in India [2].

In addition to asbestosis, which can be caused by years of lesser exposure as well as less than a month of intense exposure, asbestos causes a variety of cancers in man. The inhaled fibres migrate throughout the body, and cause cancers of the lung, stomach, and other sites. Otherwise-rare cancers known as mesothelioma have afflicted not only asbestos workers, but also workers in all the building trades, asbestos workers' families exposed to dust brought home on the workers' clothes, and neighbours of asbestos plants, some of whom played as children on asbestos waste dumps. US health authorities acknowledge that the evidence does not point to any level of asbestos exposure as being free from cancer risk. In the light of this, tougher standards have been recommended in cases where asbestos can't just be replaced by safer substances [3].

In 1978, US health authorities estimated that 50,000 new cases of cancer will occur annually for 30 more years as a result of past exposures to asbestos in America. The recognition of this catastrophe has led to bans on asbestos in moulded pipe insulation and other products, and increasingly severe regulations on both the use of asbestos in work and asbestos pollution. The decline in US consumption of asbestos accelerated in 1980 and asbestos cement products reflect this. One company, Johns-Manville, has recently closed four asbestos-cement pipe manufacturing plants. This is largely a result of public concern over the contamination of drinking water supplied *via* asbestsocement pipes. US consumption of A-C pipes declined by one-third in 1980. Sweden, for example, has banned asbestos-cement [4].

To avoid the cost of regulations and lawsuits for damages, multinational firms have looked to developing nations as sanctuaries to manufacture cheaply, and as a 'last frontier' for developing new markets,

A survey in 1980 focused on asbestos manufacturing activities in India that had been constructed and operated in collaboration with the world's largest multinational asbestos corporations. In Ahmedabad, Shree Digvijay Cement Company Ltd produces 50,000 tons per year of asbestos-cement pipe sheet. Its foreign collaborator is the Johns-Manville Corporation, the largest asbestos company in the Western Hemisphere. Shree Digvijay has been a steady customer for Canadian asbestos fibre mined by Johns-Mansville. Asbestos-laden solid wastes and process water are dumped outside of the Ahmedabad plant in a completely wanton manner. Children play on the waste dumps, and workers are not informed of the lethal dangers of the dust. Johns-Manville is the exclusive seller of Shree Digvijay products shipped to the Middle East and Africa. Ironically, these products bear no warning labels, yet Johns-Manville is being sued for billions of dollars by thousands of American workers with cancer and asbestosis for not having affixed warning labels on products sold in the US until 1964 [5]. With juries sometimes awarding punitive damages to asbestos victims and new lawsuits being filed at the rate of over 5,000 per year, there is growing concern that even Johns-Mansville and other large companies may not be able to "meet their obligation" [6].

In Bombay, Hindustan Ferodo Ltd produces brake linings, clutch facings and asbestos textiles. This company is 74 per cent owned by the dominant British asbestos company, Turner and Newall. In late 1979, exports to the UK were halted after shipments were refused because they were not triple-packed in polyethylene bags. Inside the plant, conditions resemble those in British factories 50 years ago [4, 5]. The workers are not informed about the hazards of breathing asbestos dust, which is present in visible concentrations in the plant atmosphere. Workers are not informed by management when their chest X-rays reveal asbestosis. Even the simplest housekeeping measures are not employed e g, dust on the floors is dry swept, not wet mopped. The same lockers are used for street clothes and the dusty work clothes, assuring the contamination of the workers' homes. Overwhelmed exhaust ventilation is used to remove dust in some processes. Suction ducts lead to a room where the waste dust is collected in canvas sacks. The wastes are transferred to jute sacks which leak dust profusely. When charged with such practices in print, management has simply denied everything; claiming, for example, that there are "very clear notices that point the dangers [of asbestos] out" in the plant. "The labourers who carry the dust away from the ventilation system have only to remove and close the polyethylene bags in which the dust lies and take it to the stores [7].

In a plant tour conducted in March 1981, one of the present authors (Rakesh Madan) was informed that the dust is actually collected in canvas bags, then *transferred* to jute bags, which are loaded into an open truck and shipped to the dump in Deonar. Nowhere in the dust collection process were polyethylene bags observed

to be used. Amin, the works director, explained, "We have to use canvas bags so the air can pass through them to facilitate collection." During two plant tours, no warning notices were seen in the plant. Asbestos waste was piled outside the plant and exhausted by ventilation ducts along a major commuter train line.

A management's assertion that "the factory has a good medical record" is a grim reminder that standards of health protection in the asbestos industry are rather low. *The Times of India* reported that Hindustan Ferodo had fired employees whose medical examinations showed they were suffering from asbestosis and noted "at least 35 per cent of those still on their jobs are afflicted and yet are neither discharged nor duly compensated" [8].

Even in the apparent vacuum of government regulation, it is appalling that these giant asbestos companies conduct business under such conditions in India and elsewhere. Yet the concealment of the hazards of asbestos is neither new to them nor accidental. A meeting of asbestos firms based in 24 countries was held in 1978 to consider the matter of using warning labels on their products. An internal memorandum reflected their unanimous inclination to avoid the use of warning labels wherever possible [4]:

> In those countries where it was felt it was still too early to start voluntary labelling, in fear of a possible negative influence on sales, steps should be taken to prepare commercial people for the idea, making clear that in the absence of an industry's initiative we could run the risk of being imposed the 'skull and crossbones' symbol for our products.

In response to the bad publicity about health hazards the Indian asbestos industry is forming a trade association. The Indian companies will learn how to counter adverse reports at a meeting set for June 1981 in England.

Needless to say, the asbestos industry is not the only purveyor of severe health hazards in India, though it is among the worst. Similar problems can be documented in other industries, including pesticides, dyes, and other chemicals. [9, 10]

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