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Double standards: asbestos in India

Informed eye-witness accounts of hazards in and around factories in the Third World are rare. Here Barry Castleman presents an investigation of two asbestos factories in India. Both are associated with Western multinational companies and both are far from safe



This child is playing on a dump of asbestos. The asbestos came from the Shree Digvijay Cement Co's factory in Ahmedabad. The plant also discharges asbestos in waste water (right). In the US and in Britain, these practices would be irregular because of the hazards they create for the people near the factory

Few companies in the Third World have the medical and scientific expertise needed to control hazards in factories. Yet the medical literature is replete with hard-learned lessons about the damaging effects of toxic substances on industrial workers—lessons often learned in the factories of the same companies that now dominate the international mining and manufacturing scene. So one might expect subsidiaries or affiliates of large multinationals in Third World countries to observe higher standards of environmental safety than local industries.

At least this is the aim of many of the multinationals that operate in the Third World. For example, Dr Harold Gordon, the medical director of Dow Chemical, says: "The rule is that we abide by the local standards or the Dow standards, whichever are the most stringent."

But this article paints rather a different picture in the case of two other multinationals. It is based on visits to two Indian asbestos plants—the Shree Digvijay Cement Company's plant in Ahmedabad and Hindustan Ferodo in Bombay—last year. The visits revealed hazards in and around both factories that would not be allowed in the West.

Asbestos-cement building panels and pipes are popular in India—in 1977, 11 plants there made 420 000 tonnes of asbestos-cement sheet and 81 000 tonnes of pipe. One of these plants is owned by the Shree Digvijay Cement Company. The factory is almost 20 years old and the American asbestos corporation Johns-Manville helped build it. Johns-Manville supplied Shree Digvijay with "technical know-how, designs, drawings, specifications, and planning data and with all other technical information and engineering assistance including the erection and supervision of the project". Johns-Manville owns some shares in the company.

Early in the 1970s, Shree Digvijay began exporting its products and appointed Johns-Manville as its sole selling agents for the Middle East and Africa. In addition, Johns-Manville supplies Shree Digvijay with raw asbestos fibre. Although Johns-Manville does not own the Indian company, it is tied to it by a myriad of business connections.

More importantly, it is Johns-Manville's stated policy that: "We will reserve the right to refuse to sell asbestos fibre to customers who fail to meet applicable government regulations on asbestos exposure and therefore en-

Barry Castleman is an environmental consultant in the US. This account is based on visits to India last year.





A house built of scrap asbestos (left) near Shree Digvijay and asbestos dumped outside the Rane Brake factory in Madras, 25 per cent owned by Cape Industries (right). Below, a peddlar trundles asbestos pipes along the road from Shree Digvijay

danger the health of their employees, and expose Johns-Manville to unwarranted liability. In those countries where there are no governmental regulations on asbestos exposure [India is one], accepted industrial hygiene practice shall apply."

The road to the Shree Digvijay plant was lined on both sides by asbestos-cement waste. A high wall surrounded the factory. Outside, untreated waste water emptied into a trench piled with solid asbestos waste on either side. Solid waste from the plant littered the neighbourhood where houses stand—indeed some of the houses were made from hunks of asbestos-cement pipes and scraps of corrugated asbestos-cement sheets. Children played on the wastes around their homes.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires that suspended solids in waste water from American plants making asbestos cement be tightly controlled. By 1984, the EPA says it will demand that asbestos-cement factories in the US discharge no asbestos at all in their waste water—they must recycle all their process water. The agency will also require that disposal sites for asbestos waste are fenced off and warning notices posted, or that the dumped asbestos is covered daily with soil or some other material. The EPA may even order widespread restrictions on the use of asbestos under the Toxic Substances Control Act—it has already selected asbestos-cement pipes that carry drinking water for special attention. At an EPA conference in July last year, it became obvious that there are many possible substitutes for the asbestos-cement materials that are used in construction.

Shree Digvijay's asbestos products carried no warning labels, telling people how to avoid creating dust when they use the pipes and sheet. It is well-known that cutting and working asbestos-cement gives rise to hazardous asbestos dust.

It is ironic that thousands of American workers have brought suits against Johns-Manville for not putting warning labels on the asbestos products it sold in the US until 1964. Yet Shree Digvijay's asbestos-cement products, made from fibres that Johns-Manville sold to the company, carried no labels in 1980.

In 1978, the Asbestos International Association—an international group of asbestos companies—issued a memorandum which made it plain that the asbestos companies would accept warning labels piecemeal, country by country, and, in countries where public pressure for warning labels was too great to ignore, would lobby for the mildest possible warning.

No such pressure seems likely in India. Neither are Shree Digvijay's workers likely to imitate Johns-Manville's former employees in California who brought law suits against the company for more than a billion dollars.

Johns-Manville must have known about the consequences of exposing the public and workers to asbestos for a long time. In 1967, 17 fatal cases of cancer of the lining of the lung (pleural mesothelioma, a disease caused almost exclusively by asbestos) were reported in the small town of Manville in New Jersey. By 1973, there were 72 victims of the rare and invariably fatal cancer in this town of 15 000 people, where Johns-Manville still has its largest manufacturing plant. There were numerous other reports strongly suggesting exposure to asbestos as a cause of this disease.



When Dr Paul Kotin, Johns-Manville's senior vice-president for health, safety and the environment, was shown pictures of Shree Digvijay's plant, he said, "That's criminal". But John McKinney, chairman of Johns-Manville's board, says in his company's annual report for 1979, "Asbestos fibre enjoyed one of its best years due primarily to strength in overseas markets where most of the fibre is used in asbestos-cement construction materials." Last year the company sold asbestos fibres worth $168 million.

In Bombay, Hindustan Ferodo makes asbestos brake and clutch linings and asbestos textiles. The plant opened in 1956. The British asbestos company, Turner and Newell, owns 74 per cent of the company. The picture of the plant that a well-informed local source painted is not pretty. Exports of Hindustan Ferodo's products stopped in 1979, partly because the local demand was high and partly because shipments to Britain were refused—they were not triple-packed in polyethylene bags as a safety measure.

Inside the plant, only workers in the fluffing and carding areas are issued with respirators. Here the asbestos dust is like the dust "behind a bus on a dirt road in the dry season". Workers are not told about the hazards of asbestos and often do not wear the respirators. They receive an "inconvenience allowance" for working in this section.

The same source says that simple "housekeeping" measures are not employed in the plant: floors are "dry-swept", creating dust; the same lockers hold overalls and the workers' own clothes, which are thus contaminated: workers receive regular medical examinations but are not told the results. Day labourers who carry away the waste dust that the ventilation system traps have no protection; they are covered with dust.

These two examples illustrate a fundamental point. The life-saving medical and engineering technology that should be exported along with dangerous technologies is often left behind. It is time for responsible members of the business world to step forward and make a commitment not to profit by such abuses. □