

FILE NAME: Shree Digvijay (SDV)

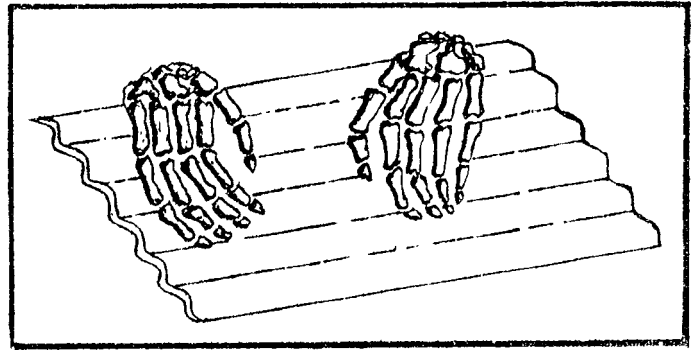
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asbestos :

the dust that kills



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A CED HEALTH CELL FEATURE JULY 1983

The killer fibre had penetrated the very essence of his being. His cough was more painful than ever. Each successive breath was a harsher rasp than the previous one. "Death's clutch", asbestosis had gripped yet another victim. This time it was S. Rajagopal, who joined Hindustan Ferado Limited (HFL), as an operator in the dust-prone breaklining and clutch facing department in 1961. Ten years later the disease struck.

The diagnosis pronounced by the Employees State Insurance (E.S.I.) medical team and private practitioners was asthma or bronchitis. But a few months later another verdict was delivered by the Sion Hospital authorities - asbestosis.

His pleas to the management for a thorough medical examination went unheeded for a long time. Finally the management decided to refer him to Dr. G.G. Dave, medical inspector of factories, (Maharashtra). Dave's diagnosis was "acute bronchitis".

Unsure of Dave's conclusion, he filed a petition to the Chairman of Turner and Newall (the transnational corporation link in Britain), for a proper medical screening. In the meanwhile, his health deteriorated and the Sion Hospital authorities advised immediate treatment. But he resigned from HFL, to collect his gratuity. Why? His wife was ill.

Rajagopal left the company but continued to fight. He filed a writ petition with the Bombay High Court, to set up an ESI medical board to examine him. The ESI board was constituted and the High Court suspended the writ petition.

In a preliminary medical interview with Rajagopal, the newly formed ESI medical board (Coimbatore) consisting of the Dean of the Coimbatore Medical College, the superintendent of the ESI hospital and a cardiac therapy specialist flatly ruled out even the remotest possibility of asthma or bronchitis. There was no mention on their part of the nature of his ailment. Rajagopal goes on to say that he even signed the papers

Further developments have occurred after a letter was sent in recently by the union to the Management and Factory Inspector demanding a medical check up of the workers. The management has insisted on a medical check up. But no official written reply has been received from the factory inspector. What develops further remains to be seen.

II Shree Digvijay Asbestos Cement Plant (Ahmedabad)

According to a study conducted by J. Kumar of the Central Labour Institute Bombay and the annual report of the National Institute of Occupational Health 1980, the Ahmedabad - based Shree Digvijay Asbestos Cement plant's safety record is no better. The studies revealed that:-

1. The fibre concentrations in the yarn unpacking, mixing, spinning, weaving and rope divisions were 367 fibres per c.c., 418 fibres per c.c., 225 fibres per c.c., and 216 fibres per c.c., respectively. This is far above the statutory permissible level of 2 to 0.2 fibres per c.c. for different kinds of asbestos.
2. Out of 320 workers selected at random, 6.5% suffered from asbestosis due to exposure.
3. The plant continued to use crocidolite which causes mesothelioma. Perhaps it should be pointed out here that manufacturers in the U.K. imposed a voluntary ban on the import of crocidolite fibres in the early seventies.

Another study of the same plant conducted by Barry Castleman, and published in the "New Scientist" said that:-

4. The road leading to the unit was lined on both sides by asbestos cement waste.
5. A high wall surrounded the factory and beyond it untreated waste water was emptied into a trench and piled with solid asbestos waste on either side. Children played on the waste around their homes.
6. Some of the houses were made from hunks of asbestos cement pipes and scraps of corrugated asbestos waste sheets.

III - Hindustan Ferado Limited (HFL) in Bombay is a subsidiary concern of the British Asbestos Company Turner and Newall. The Indian plant which opened in 1956 manufactures clutch linings and asbestos textiles. A collation of reports from the Times of India, India Today, Business India, New Scientist and Science Today paint a dismal picture of the health and safety conditions in the unit.

The Company brazenly abuses the law in several ways:-