

EDITORIAL – IJRS April 2011

A WALL OF INDIFFERENCE

It all began in 1995.

On 26th December that year, Suresh Chand Atri, a retired civil and environmental engineer who was living in Amarpurkashi, wrote to the Central Pollution Control Board in Delhi, informing them of the widespread air, land and water pollution caused by M/S Shakumbhri Straw Products Ltd. People, plants and animals living in ten to twelve villages around the factory, were being affected.

Mr Atri's letter outlined very precisely the situation of the factory, the owners, the affected villages and the pollution that was being caused. Untreated effluent was pouring directly into the Aril River and, because of its high ph value, the river water was no longer fit for drinking or bathing, not just for humans but for cattle as well. Its caustic nature meant it could not be used for irrigation either.

Suspended particles of paper pulp in the water had quickly blocked the river's flow and spread to the land on both sides, damaging acres of previously fertile, productive agricultural land.

Because the factory uses rice husks as fuel, the resulting ash contains 80% silica, making it insoluble in water and granular in shape. From the very beginning, the factory made no provision for disposal of this ash but instead, just dumped it at the side of the state highway, on village link roads and even the lanes of inhabited areas. Local people's eyes, skin and clothes were seriously affected. The ash would also stick to the leaves of plants, spoiling their growth and making them unfit for use as animal fodder.

He also mentions the air pollution, caused by the thick black cloud of smoke that daily polluted the environment and the highly pungent and obnoxious odour that pervaded the air. Several times a day, the boiler released steam with a very high-pitched noise, disturbing the atmosphere and hurting villagers' ear drums.

At the end of the letter, Mr Atri makes six practical suggestions for dealing with the pollution, preventing any more and

compensating farmers whose livelihood was ruined.

Copies of the letter were sent to the District Magistrate of Moradabad, the Governor of the state, the Central Minister of the Environment and the Senior Superintendent of Police in Moradabad.

There was no response.

On 16th April 1996, Mr Atri therefore wrote a reminder to the Governor of the state and sent a copy to the Central Minister of the Environment.

Again, there was no response.

In 1997, Mr Atri and his wife left the village to live with one of their daughters. Local people took up the fight. Some tried to block the factory outlet pipe where it poured effluents into the river while some went on hunger strike. All to no avail. The factory owners simply called the police who beat the protesters and forced them to leave.

The Society for Agro Industrial Education in India which runs the rural development project at Amarpurkashi is a member of the Uttar Pradesh Voluntary Health Association (UPVHA). The Society asked for their help in approaching one of their members, the People's Science Institute in Dehra Dun. The P.S.I. has a laboratory for testing water. In April 2002, they sent a scientist who collected samples of water from three different places on the Aril River. One was from where effluent from a second paper factory, Ram Chandra Straw Products Ltd, poured into it; one was from where effluent from Shakumbhri Straw Products Ltd. poured into it and one was from further downstream.

The results showed that the PH value in all three samples was higher than the prescribed limit. The Total Suspended Solids were respectively, 15 times, 29 times and 17.8 times above the standard prescribed by the U.P. Pollution Control Board. The results for Biochemical Oxygen Demand showed that BOD was 35 times, 45 times and 46 times above the prescribed limit.

These results were published in local newspapers on 22nd May and were also sent to the Regional Office of the Pollution Control Board in Moradabad, the State Pollution

Control Board in Lucknow and the District Magistrate in Moradabad.

No one responded.

In 2005, people decided to try the open public complaints days that are held every week by government officers. These are known as Tehsil Diwas. On the 16th November, farmers handed in a complaint, asking for legal action to be taken against the polluters and for compensation to be paid to those who had been affected. On 23rd, a reminder was given, asking for immediate action and requesting a survey by an expert medical team. A further memorandum was handed in on 30th, asking for action to be taken against the polluters within five days.

On 8th December, yet another reminder was handed in.

On 12th, the Tehsildar Committee sent a report to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Bilari. This report gave estimates of crop damage. It also pointed out that the paper factories were not treating their effluent adequately.

There was no response to this committee's report.

Finally, in February 2008, representatives from various voluntary organisations formed a committee to co-ordinate the campaign against the pollution with Mukat Singh as convenor.

On the 12th February, the committee presented seven proposals to the SDM, Bilari with a request to pass them on to the District Magistrate, Moradabad. These proposals were:

1. Those farmers whose land and crops had been affected should be paid compensation equal to five times the damage to their crops. In order to determine this, the report submitted to the SDM in 2005 should be used.
2. An Environment Impact Assessment should be carried out by a committee of experts from the Agricultural and Technology University Meerut to assess the severity and extent of the damage caused by the paper mill and other factories in the area.

3. An expert team from the Health Department should investigate the effect of pollution on the health of local people and on the animal population of the area so that the dangers could be evaluated and solutions found.
4. The local underground water table is continuously going down because of excessive use of water by the polluting factories. A team of government and non-government experts should find out the rate at which this table is receding so that recharge tube wells can be set up.
5. Recycling of polluted water and other effluents such as ash must be done within the four walls of the polluting factories.
6. A welfare fund should be set up by the polluting industries to help the affected people of the immediate area. This would encourage good relations between industry and local residents. A tax not less than 5% of the turnover of these industries should be levied to help this fund.
7. The Task Force already set up by the government to deal with the problems of pollution in the Aril Nadi area should be extended to include members from the affected farmers and from non-government voluntary organisations active in the immediate area.

These seven proposals would benefit both the factories and the local villagers. The SDM promised to forward them with his recommendation and said that he fully agreed with them.

Ten days passed without any response.

The decision was then made to hold a sit-in protest by the national highway near the Aril River. Mukat Singh, local farmers and students took part. Each evening, emails were sent to the UPPCB and all relevant government departments, informing them of the day's protest and requesting action. Local newspapers also covered the sit-in.

After four days of continuous sit-in and no response, it was decided to stage a fast.

Advance notice was sent to the government officers.

On the morning of 26th February, the SDM, Bilari and the Executive Engineer of the Irrigation Department suddenly turned up at the sit-in site and asked the protesters to stop. They said that they completely agreed with the seven suggestions and felt that they offered a sustainable solution to the pollution.

The SDM promised to implement the first proposal as that was one that came directly under his control. He assured the protesters that he would send four officers to assess and record the damage to crops and from their report, he himself would work out the amount of compensation to be paid to farmers.

He also proposed a meeting for the 7th March where the main business would be to devise an action plan for the implementation of all seven proposals.

Finally, he said that he had come to stop the sit-in and fast at the specific request of the District Magistrate, Moradabad.

The protest therefore ended on condition that the SDM would keep his promises.

What happened next was that the SDM told affected farmers to make an official application for compensation in his court. This they did. They were then called to attend a court hearing. Every time the farmers turned up for a hearing, it was postponed and another date given. This went on for a whole year with these poor farmers having to meet the expense of travelling to the court and losing valuable time when they should have been working on their land. Finally, the SDM told them not to come any more as he could not do anything for them.

So much for his promises.

Thus have passed fifteen years of peaceful, democratic protest with over 500 letters and postcards of complaint to central, state and regional ministers and officials as well as countless emails from supporters abroad.

And the result of all this?

Today, in 2011, the Aril River is an evil-smelling, sluggish mire with a thick crust of filthy, caustic effluent. Independent tests done by a government laboratory in April 2010 showed that the PH value has continued to increase while the Total Suspended Solids are now more than forty times over the prescribed limit and BOD has increased to over 129 times above the limit.

In the adjacent fields, the crops are thin and weak. Everywhere, at the sides of the highway and link roads and in fields, there are huge, ever-increasing mounds of granular ash. The water level has dropped from 30 feet to

over 100. Eye infections and cases of jaundice have increased significantly. When the factories are running at full steam, ash falls on plants and trees, crops and washing hung out to dry, on people – their hair, skin and clothes and all the time, the factories are growing. What started as two small paper mills has grown to four.

It is not just the factory owners who show complete indifference and insensitivity. They, after all, have only one aim – to make as much money as possible, no matter what the consequences.

The most disturbing is the total indifference and insensitivity of those whose job it is to protect the environment and look after the needs of the local people. Government officers and the Pollution Control Board have shown absolutely no concern whatsoever for the environment or for the people who are affected by the pollution. None of them lives in the affected area so they assume that it does not affect them.

But ultimately, the environment affects us all.