

ECC NEWS

NO. 22.

Dec. 1985

(11)

✓

People's right to information — Interview with Dr. Thelma Narayan

I did my schooling in Bhopal and we used to stay in the Polo Bungalow (which is now a thirty-bed Community Hospital). The Union Carbide Factory came up in the seventies just opposite where we stayed.

I belong to a group called Medico Friend Circle, a group of doctors and other people who are involved in Health issues. It is an All India group. Dr. Ravi Narayan, my husband, is the convenor of this group and the organisational office of this group is here in Bangalore. Other voluntary groups, who knew about MFC needed an objective assessment of the situation, and requested our group to send a team to Bhopal.

About eleven MFC members along with three friends from Baroda Medical College had gone to make a study. What we learned was that on day one, on the 3rd day of December itself the Professor of Forensic Medicine, Dr. Heeresh Chandra who conducted the autopsies on the bodies felt that the picture he saw was something like Cyanide poisoning. The blood was cherry red in appearance whereas normally it would be bluish. He suggested that the antidote to Cyanide poisoning, namely Sodium Thiosulfate be given. The local medical community scoffed at him and said that he was a doctor of the dead and that he shouldn't be talking about the living.

At the same time there was a telex message from the medical director of Union Carbide from

America, Dr. Bipin Avashia, saying that the treatment should be symptomatic. He also happened to mention that if Cyanide poisoning was suspected to give Sodium Thiosulfate. But a few days later when he did come to Bhopal he withdrew the statement.

A German toxicologist was invited to come to Bhopal by the Government of India. He arrived about four or five days after the disaster, Dr. Mar Daunderer. He brought with him various tools of investigation. Based on that he also felt that it was some Cyanide-like poisoning and he suggested that Sodium Thiosulfate be given to the patient. Anyway there was a lot of opposition to this and he was soon packed off to Germany.

ICMR carried out a very detailed study on the efficacy of Sodium Thiosulfate, the study, called a double blind study is one of the scientific method of studies. On the analysis of the data ICMR found that when given Sodium Thiosulfate the patients had very significant symptomatic relief. On the basis of this study they made certain recommendations to the Government of India that the affected victims should be given Sodium Thiosulfate. They gave certain criteria to select the patients. This was at the end of January and a press release was given in the first week of February to the same effect. The Central Government obviously accepted this. But there was a hitch at the State level because ulti-

mately health is a State subject and the State Health authorities have to take action on any recommendations given by either ICMR or the Central Government. No action was taken on this recommendation.

The local voluntary groups who had a scientific background kept raising this issue of Thiosulfate. Despite all their protests Thiosulfate was not given. The State health authorities had another meeting with ICMR. They took action in May and made Thiosulfate available through their clinics and dispensaries. The doctors in these clinics were totally unconvinced about its efficacy. We made a short survey and found that the drug was being given so slowly that it would take about seven years to cover the affected population. This was a totally ridiculous situation.

In June four groups of activists formed Jan Swasthya Samiti involving the basti people and volunteers from different sections. The West Bengal Drug Action Forum sent doctors on a voluntary basis to run clinics. Volunteers from MFC, and from Delhi and Bombay also helped. This group of doctors and other health workers devised a questionnaire by which patients were monitored before and after the injections to see whether there would be a significant improvement.

In Bhopal one of the most active groups was Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangharsh Morcha with Dr. Anil Sadgopal and a band of volunteers.

It took one year for the news to reach the Press!

Cyanide leaked in Bhopal?

London, Nov. 10 (UNN): Lethal cyanide gas, of the kind used in chemical weapons, was responsible for the killing of about 2,500 people in the Bhopal disaster last December, the 'Observer' newspaper here quoted Indian scientists as saying.

This conclusion, which contradicts earlier reports that the deaths were caused by the methyl isocyanate (MIC), was based on hundreds of post-mortem reports, the paper said.

It said Indian scientists believed that many of those still suffering from long-term injuries caused by the disaster had been wrongly treated.

The scientists' conclusions, contained in a confidential report "devastating" for the Union Carbide as the company had maintained that the temperature MIC tank did not rise enough to produce cyanide.

The scientists said

They have been raising various issues of Bhopal. They formed Basti committees, mobilised the people and discussed issues; did spot surveys as to how many people had actually received the initial fund relief and found that it had reached only a small proportion of the affected population. They conducted a dharna because of a lack of response to their demands even for relief, rehabilitation and rations.

Other groups working included the Nagrik Rahat Aur Punarvas Samiti, a trade Union relief front from Bombay and the Union Carbide Workers Union. In June they formed the Jan Swasthya Samiti. The Jan Swasthya Samiti formed Jan Swasthya Kendra and set up their clinic on a field outside the inner gate of Union Carbide. They started giving the patients Sodium Thiosulfate. For three weeks their clinic ran very well. On one particular day the patients had pyrogenic reactions which could have been due to some adulterant in the injection. This was notified to the health authorities. In fact these patients were taken to the Government hospital and were treated and all of them came home the next day. But the local health authorities made a big fuss about this and said that the injections were not being given in a scientific way. The injection was given by doctors and all the ICMR criteria were being followed.

A protest demonstration was organised outside the Madhya Pradesh Secretariat. On the day before the demonstration the police carried out preventive arrests and arrested all the doctors and health workers who were associated with the Kendra. The Kendra was not involved with organising the protest demonstration. But all these doctors were arrested in the middle of the night and were not given any reasons as to why they had been arrested. They were not allowed to leave the room at all for 18 hours. When the de-

monstration was over the next day the doctors were released. But the Government refused to give Thiosulfate to them and so they were not able to restart the Kendra.

One of the doctors from Bombay along with two patients went through the lawyers collective to the Supreme Court to file a writ petition saying that their treatment had been interrupted and that the State Government did not allow voluntary agencies to conduct this clinic. The Supreme Court gave a judgement that the M.P. Government should allow restarting the clinic and should not interfere with voluntary groups. The same doctor filed another petition saying that though ICMR had suggested Thiosulfate in January it had still not been given to the patients. The Supreme Court passed another judgement that the M.P. Government should put up a plan to cover the entire affected population by a certain date.

It is a fact that Union Carbide played a big role in Bhopal. Most of the big shots in Bhopal had a relative working in UC, a lot of senior doctors in the Gandhi Medical College are medical advisors to UC. UC also sponsored most of the medical symposia and conferences held in the Gandhi Medical College. Besides, the financial funding, a special ward was attached to the Gandhi Medical College where bureaucrats and others are treated.

The budget of the Research and

Development Division in Bhopal was far greater than the budget of the UC factory itself and what research was going on there is unknown. People say that the data of the research was not analysed in India. That in itself is suspicious, then why did the Government of India allow it? Why did they not make conditions that India should know what exactly was going on?

When such a massive tragedy occurred in India, it is the right of the Indian people to know what exactly happened. There has been secrecy even from the beginning. Nobody was even divulging what gases leaked. Union Carbide said it was a type of tear gas. Four months later it became evident that it was a mixture of gases and Hydrogen Cyanide was one of the gases produced. In the UC Factory manual, an equation was given stating that one of the breakdown products of MIC at a given temperature is Hydrogen Cyanide. This secrecy is something that has to be questioned — secrecy on the part of the multinationals as well as the Government of India for not questioning them.

The Central Pollution Board report said that on the second or third day after the accident they found Hydrogen Cyanide still emanating from the tank. (It was obviously discovered then; but was divulged only in June). People have the right to information about something that affects their health.

A comparison I would like to make is the difference in the response of the Government and everybody including the media, to the Kanishka episode. It was a tragedy where 329 innocent people lost their lives. Definitely action had to be taken but the amount of money that was spent is phenomenal. Then you think of Bhopal where according to official estimates 2,000 people have died (the unofficial record is 8,000 people). They are not even interested in finding out the exact figures. In Bhopal it was some unknown, uncared for basti dwellers. In Kanishka it was the upper class.

Slum Youth Orientation

Forty young people from nine different slums — tinkers, painters, students, waiters, cleaners, dhobis, masons and stone breakers were here for a week-end orientation programme. Apart from talks and discussions, the other ways of learning were photo-language, political/revolutionary songs, and simulation games, street plays, poster-making.

The participants presented skits on 'power game in the society and the inability of the poor to get employment, harassment and related problems,' 'Denial of basic rights to the poor in Government schools and Government hospitals,' 'Unemployment, low wages, inadequate housing, alcohol' etc. They also composed songs and prepared posters.

Interview with R. Radhakrishnan

We call the Bhopal industrial tragedy a genocide. We have gone through the old records of Union Carbide and the activities they have done in connection with the establishment of UC and the Research that was going on there and we have come to the conclusion that it was a planned genocide. All safety measures were in disorder and they did not repair.

Kerala Shastra Sahithya Parishad (People's Science Movement) has arranged 1,000 classes in Kerala to educate people about Bhopal. KSSP called for the boycott of UC products. We also organised a mass signature campaign involving one lakh people and submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister. UC was an eye-opener and we see that multi-nationals are blood-sucking vampires.

In 1947 we got political liberation. For economic liberation we have to get economic sovereignty and the first step to achieve it is to boycott all the products of the multi-nationals. **We call for a boycott of the Union Carbide products, Eveready battery and torch.** Bhopal is completing one year on 2nd December. **We call for the observance of two-minute silence on 2nd December, 1985.** With the help of all other people's Science Movements in this country KSSP will arrange protest meetings in State capitals exhorting the boycott call.