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circle
bulletin

JUNE 1985

EDITORIAL

THE CHALLENGE OF BHOPAL

"The growing multinational culture must be destroyed because it leads to economic chaos, increased social disparities, mass poverty and filthy affluence in coexistence, environmental degradation, and ultimately civil strife and war."

To get a balanced, rational development and to preserve the environment, a new development process is needed. The biggest intellectual and political challenge of our times is to articulate and demonstrate this new kind of development."

— A statement of shared concern

Citizens report on state of India's Environment, 1982.

Its six months since the worst industrial and environmental disaster in recorded history. Bhopal has not only been a nightmare for those who were there on the night of 2/3 December, 1984. It is also a portent of events to come.

World Environment Day (5th June) has come and gone. There have been the usual meetings, seminars and lectures, the usual lip-service to ecological sensitivity, the usual narrations of the health and social hazards of environmental pollution and the usual pious recommendations of what can and should be done.

How many more Bhopals will we need in this country before we are shaken from our apathy?

- from our callousness to our disadvantaged and exploited fellow human beings who are always the worst hit in such disasters.
- from our insensitivity to nature, our forests, our rivers and our land.
- from our insensate rush for chemicalising and technologising our lifestyles.
- from our race for profits even at the cost of the health of our workers, our people.

The medical community in India will be increasingly called upon to respond to the medical and health problems caused by more ecological disasters. What will our response be?

Will we see every disaster as a chance to refine our clinical skills, satisfy our charity and welfare urges, exploit the research potential for career development and use the opportunity to ask for more and more sophisticated gadgetry for our institutions?

Or will we be challenged by these disasters to raise our voice collectively to oppose the unhealthy trends in our society to use our knowledge

and social potential to support the growing awareness for a healthier and more egalitarian social system; to use our research skills to strengthen and conscientise our fellow human beings to an increasing health and ecological awareness.

The dilemma of a man who enters a room to find a tap running and a wash basin overflowing, faces us today. Will we choose to be floor moppers or tap turners off?

Overpowered, compromised and hypnotised by the products and high pressure sales tactics of the multinational pharmaceutical industry, our sensitivities have been so dulled that we are quite content to be merely 'floor moppers'. Can we ever be tap-turners off? The International movement of physicians for prevention of Nuclear war is a thou-

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Effects on Mental Health

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supportive follow up for mental health problems in adults, adolescents and children (2).

A team of psychiatrists from NIMHANS, Bangalore have conducted training programmes in mental health for the medical officers of the state health services, posted in the gas affected areas. The training provides the necessary skill to diagnose and manage the common mental problems seen in the victims of the gas exposure (2).

A mental health care manual has also been prepared by the Bangalore team (3).

The mental health dimension is a much neglected dimension of health in spite of the much publicised WHO definition of health. Doctors in Bhopal were disregarding or misinterpreting the symptoms of stress and passing it off as malinering or compensation neurosis. This mis-diagnosis was sadly reflective of our medical training which plays only lip service to mental health in spite of its grave importance in health care and the doctor patient relation-ship.

We salute our community oriented Psychiatric colleagues for bringing to the fore this much neglected dimension through practical interventions in supportive care, communication and training in Bhopal and not exploiting the situation only for its research potential.

1. Kinston, W and Rosser, R. (1974) Disaster: Effects on Mental and Physical state, *Journal of Psychosom. Research* 13, 437
2. Directorate of Information and Publicity, M.P. Govt (1985) Review meeting of ICMR Projects at Bhopal, Khabar, 5th May 1985.
3. *Mental Health Care Manual for Medical Officers.* by R. Srinivas Murthy et al., National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, P.O. Box. 2900, Bangalore - 560 029. (For copies of the manual write to Dr. R. Srinivas Murthy at the above address)
4. Also available with mfc office a list of references on mental health aspects of disasters.

The Challenge of Bhopal

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glt provoking example showing that if we want to, we can.

Bhopal too is a challenge? So are many other more insidious developments in our country. The growing investment in nuclear — energy now discredited as an energy resource in the West, or the gradual take over of the cottage industry in food by big business, — each of this though different from the other has a growing similarity representing either a subservience to the profit motive or an insensitivity to health hazards or

both. We feature some of these aspects in this bulletin. We also feature investigations in Bhopal which raise some of these issues for our readership.

Minimata, Seveso, Long island were too distant to make any impact. Amlai, Chembur, Handigodu, Harihar, Zuari, Nagda, Mavoor, Silent vally, Thal vaishet hare not stimulated us either. Will Bhopal do so?

Nuclear Hazards

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true, is truly shocking.

7) **Functioning of the health physics unit:** The health physics unit that monitors radioactivity and oher environmental pollution in the NFC should be under an independent agency not answerable to NFC or the BARC. The alleged victimisation of a scientist of the health physics unit who did try to raise his voice about some of the environmental issues. (if correct) is a matter of deep concern.

In conclusion we suggest that an independent panel of experts and concerned citizens be invited to make an indepth, impartial inquiry, and review the situation in its totality (rather than isolated accidents) and suggest immediate remedial measures. In this regard our Forum will be willing to offer Whatever help it can."

(Some action towards improvement has taken place in response to this letter. For instance the Nuclear Fuel Complex has been brought under the Pollution Control Board and they have to obtain consent from the Pollution Control Board before discharge of the effluents. They have built a compound wall to improve security. Their sedimentation ponds have been lined with some kind of plastic material to prevent seepage. Several shortcomings still need to be reexamined.)

Will citizen's groups keep up the pressure please! This is particularly urgent since a recent government decision will promote their installation all over the country in our attempt to prepare our selves for the 'quantum jump' into the 21st Century. The movement against the prevention of Nuclear War is not enough!! (see mfc 102)

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ness in this manner, will not help the poor but only expand the ranks of the poor. I am not an economist. I do not understand the full implications and the reasons for big industry entering into the small-chain food market, but to me the consequences appear alarming.

— K. S. Jayarao, Hyderabad

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