



Pollute and Prosper II: Illegal Pollution in India's heartland.

This July saw the committed campaigners, Jyoti and Mukat Singh, founders of AFP Partner organisation, Society of Agro-Industrial Organisation, return to London. Following on from their first event in 2008, they spoke once again of the devastating effects of a negligent paper factory on their village of Amarpurkashi in Uttar Pradesh, India.



Jyoti and Mukat Singh (R-L)

Jyoti spoke eloquently of the beauty of the village in 1970 when she first visited but in contrast to the extreme poverty prevalent in the area. "It was a beautiful village, peaceful, tranquil but people were very poor." Jyoti spoke of the struggle to find vegetables and people not being able to afford food. The village had very little opportunities for employment, with most people working as small-farmers or agricultural labourers. But the village has transformed since then. There is now a thriving market where people come home laden with bags of fruits and vegetables. There is nearly 99% employment. These are some of the benefits of the paper factory. But the beautiful village is slowly disappearing. Instead of river

banks where cattle used to bathe, there is now water that barely moves due to the toxic waste. Waste is piled up on the side of the road. Jyoti spoke of the villagers' dilemma on what to do as the authorities are turning a blind eye to the problem and the subsequent frustration and powerlessness the villagers feel.

That's where AFP returned volunteers Samir Gandhi and Hinesh Mehta came in. As part of AFP's Paropkaar programme, they went to the village to carry out an environmental study in October 2009 to support Jyoti and Mukatji's campaign to stop the pollution in the village.

Hinesh fondly began by narrating how the dynamic duo were separated on the first day at Amarpurkashi when Samir fell asleep on the train and missed his stop! After rickshaws, donkeys and borrowing money from a policeman, Samir was reunited with Hinesh and their mission began.

On day two in the village, they participated in the local Science Fair. Armed with a make-shift polystyrene model of the paper factory later, the duo were a hit at the fair, talking about the environmental impacts of the pollution. Many came to listen to them and they were featured in a national newspaper. Not half bad for two individuals with limited Hindi language skills!



Hinesh and Samir (L-R)

With all the fun out of the way, the two worked hard to conduct their environmental study. Samir spoke about the interviews with various individuals including a visiting nurse from the United States who told them about the health problems associated with the pollution entering the water supply, including jaundice and stomach disorders. A farmer spoke about the economical impacts that the pollution was



having on his crop. His sugarcane had reduced in height from fourteen feet to seven feet, in effect a 50% reduction in his yield.

The local janitor spoke about the huge problem of ash from the factory affecting agriculture, getting into the eyes of livestock and at times villagers. The janitor said, "Ash falls from the sky on my food and on me when I am outdoors."

The pair conducted water sample tests but there were challenges involved in this. The first challenge was that as the Monsoons were upon them, the river water could bias the results. Secondly, the bureaucracy. It was very difficult for the pair to find an objective laboratory to conduct the crucial tests as the paper factory has a lot of political 'clout'. Hinesh and Samir narrated how they had to remain discrete and compared their findings with rigged results from the paper factory's tests.

The tests stunned the audience. For example, tests showed that the Biological Oxygen Demand (an indicator of the water's ability to sustain life) was higher than that of sewage. This is the same water that people are using to drink from and feed their plants!



The banks of River Devri, Amarpurkashi

Samir talked of wanting to carry out composition tests of the water and soil to verify what the pollution is made up of and to ascertain the problems on the inhabitants of the village. He spoke of how their study has given them scientific direction on which they would like to build upon and take the campaign forward.

So how will this information support the campaign so far? Mukatji was clear that this information was very useful evidence to put to the authorities but that there were some harsh realities that they had to face as well. Corruption being one. It is so much embedded in the system and that it has hampered this campaign immensely.

Mukatji spoke of the history of the campaign beginning with the first letter of complaint sent to Government officials in 1995. No responses were received from officials. Mukatji further talked of acquiring reports under the RTI (Right To Information) Act and the contradictions in the forest official's police complaint and the Vet's report. A major block has been the disparity between the Pollution Control Board's pollution test report and that of the independent laboratory's. And because the Pollution Control Board is state funded, theirs is the report officials will look to.

With the paper factory turning off its treatment machines to 'save electricity' and the underground water levels reducing, it will be difficult for the factory to sustain its current output. It may be that the damage will continue until the factory has to move elsewhere.



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So what can we do? AFP has a number of different ways you can get involved. You can write to MPs in the UK and India, aiding the Public Interest Litigation case that is in process. You can join the Amarpurkashi Facebook Group and a number of other ways. Contact AFP to find out more.

The time to act is most definitely now, for the sake of the inhabitants of Amarpurkashi.

Reema Kumari Jadeja ©

If you would like to support this campaign:

- 1) Download the Support the Pollution Campaign PDF which includes the sample complaint letter and email addresses of major Indian politicians and get your voice heard.
- 2) Join the Amarpurkashi Facebook Campaign.
- 3) Subscribe to the AFP newsletter and updates to keep updated with all the latest news and events.