

## Pollute and Prosper: At whose cost? – A presentation by Mukatji and Jyotji Singh (23<sup>rd</sup> July 2008)

Imagine Amarpurkashi, a village in Uttar Pradesh thirty years ago. Natural pools of ponds of water dotted across villages, providing fresh water for water buffalos, birds and other wildlife found in huge numbers. The villagers enjoying the tranquillity, peace and clean air whilst the cattle graze freely by the roadsides and riverbanks. To reach fresh water, bore holes for hand pumps supplying drinking water only needed to be 30 feet deep and incidents of asthma and jaundice are few and far between. The lack of exposure to commerce and industry however, means that poverty is prevalent and there are few employment opportunities.



Then India's industrial evolution- began. Five paper making factories came to the area. One factory based on Amarpurkashi village's side of the river, whilst another company set up a paper mill on the opposite side of the river. Since then, these factories have expanded so considerably that they can now generate their own electricity. The prospect that these new industries would yield a better future for the village communities through offering employment opportunities and bringing wealth into the area was soon quashed by the ugly side of industrialisation.

To feed the expansion of the factories, driven by demand arising from India's recent economic progress, many acres of good quality agricultural land has been acquired. The industries that have established themselves in the area have had a significant impact on the natural habitat and villages. The river is now extremely polluted with frothy brown and white foam lacing the black water which courses through the riverbanks. This polluted water is stagnant, and does not flow apart from during the monsoon season, when the rains cause it to overflow into the farmers fields destroying crops and livelihoods.



The natural pools of freshwater which animals and birds used to freely graze upon have long disappeared. There are no longer any natural areas for the buffalos to bathe in.



The domestic hand pumps used by the villagers now need to be over 100 feet deep to reach drinkable water. Even the water levels have dropped significantly due to the massive quantities of water used by both the industries that have established themselves in the area.

Other noticeable changes include the air pollution. Wafts of black smoke regularly float through the villages and the increased incidences of respiratory diseases, jaundice and asthma in the villages have been significant. The granular black ash generated as a by-product of using risk husk for fuel has high non-dissolvable silica content which is deposited on clothes, buildings and skin can cause long term damage to eyes. The chirping birds have been long replaced by the sound of whirring machinery which runs at all hours, and the whistles that regularly punctuate the working patterns of the factories.

One of the worst incidences of pollutions was in the very early days when the factories used to dump the ash onto the main road. Everyone assumed the ash was cold and dead. A wrong assumption which led to horrific injuries and burns being inflicted upon people and animals passing by.

Since realising the negative impact of industrialisation, Mukatji and Jyotiji have engaged in a number of efforts to bring about change in the area. Many of their earlier pleas fell to deaf ears, despite approaching the key people who should have been able to help. A retired engineer who was working at Amarpurkashi in 1995 sent out numerous letters, including to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the Governor of the State, the Regional, State and National Pollution Control Boards and the Central Minister responsible for the environment.

In 2002 the UP Voluntary Health Action Association arranged for an expert to analyse the water from the local river. The results which showed that the water pollution levels were significant were sent to authorities and local papers. This too yielded no response.

In 2005, the waters of the polluted river split over to the nearby farmland destroying valuable crops. This affected not only their livelihoods, but also limited the amount of food for their families. When the farmers complained to the Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM) about the incident at a weekly public meeting they expected swift action. Yet, once again, nothing was done.

In 2008, Mukatji and Jyotiji, along with the local villagers put together a proposal which was sent to State Pollution Control Board, the Chief Minister of U.P., the Governor of U.P. and the District Magistrate of Morabad. Along with the relevant political bodies, the local media were also informed of these proposals, which were as follows:

1. Those farmers whose land and crops has 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 Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM) in 2005 should be used.
2. An environment Impact Assessment should be carried out by a committee of experts from a Agricultural and Technological 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 the 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 organizations active in the immediate area.

Mukatji and his team believed that these proposals were realistic and provided a long term, sustainable solution to the problems being encountered. When there was no response again, they decided to stage a sit-in protest close to the factories. All the relevant administrators and the local media were informed. The lack of response prompted the group to stage a hunger strike which finally prompted a reaction from the local authorities.



The day of the strike, an hour before it was due to start, the local Sub divisional Magistrate and the Executive Engineer from the District Department of Irrigation arrived at the sit-in. They publically agreed with all the proposals and promised to implement the first one as it was within his power. The remaining proposals were outside his remit and would be forwarded to the local District Magistrate for implementation. The fast was cancelled and the protest suspended as it appeared that the local and district government had finally realised the gravity of the situation and would endeavour to apply a sustainable solution.

That was all in February this year. Yet, the following four months, no action was taken. When Mukatji was in London for a week in May he decided to contact London based friends of Amarpurkashi who had seen the extent of the pollution first hand. Each of these friends were encouraged to contact the local and district government expressing their concerns.

Surprisingly this action had immediate results. Just over a month later, the SDM Bulari sent a copy of the letter he had sent to the local District Magistrate (DM). The letter highlighted four areas where action had been taken:

1. That the SDM had directed the local land revenue collector to receive applications for compensation from affected farmers so that a decision about compensation might be made.
2. That he had requested the District Magistrate (DM) to direct the Regional Pollution Control Board to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment of the area and to ask them to take action on the other proposals
3. That he had requested the DM to carry out research on the receding water table
4. That he had informed the DM that the district Chief Medical Officer had not yet carried out a survey to assess the impact of pollution on the health of the people and animals in the area.

Whilst action has not been taken on the above, it is clear that the ball has started rolling, albeit slowly.

It is easy to make the assumption that the situation in India is a result of low level of regulatory framework. The actuality is that India's rules and regulations are as sophisticated as any developed nation, at least on paper. There are a number of acts and regulations to protect the environment, at national, state and district level. The issue arises in the implementation of these rules. Many of those entrusted with the responsibility of inspecting and monitoring pollution levels are susceptible to corruption.

The factories which have been set up around the village have had the necessary equipment to treat waste and water from day one, yet due to the costs associated of running it all the time, they chose not to use it unless an inspection was taking place. Obviously warning is given prior to visits; hence everything can be put in place ahead of time. The inspectors will turn a blind eye to the obvious pollution around them and give the factory a clean bill of health.



Another problem exists with the Task Force itself, which is made up of a number of representatives from the factories. Instead of considering solutions which will improve the long run situation, they have opted for short term quick fixes such as making the river wider and deeper, and shore up the banks of the river by using sludge from the river. This 'solution' will not deal with the pollution, and instead chemical laden water will pour into the river in greater abundance. This will cause the sludge to slowly seep into the river and eventually the water will overflow onto the fields again.

So how can change happen? It seems that the Diaspora community living abroad has a voice that does count. India *is* a democracy. There are systems in place to deal with complaints. The proposals Mukatji and his team have developed consider all the stakeholders – from the villagers through to the stakeholders. If the British Asian community was to contact the relevant authorities and highlight these factors, it could make a real difference. If you want to help, download the campaign letter and send it to all the relevant parties (emails attached)<sup>1</sup>

1. Please send a copy of all letters sent to Sheetal Shah ([sheetal.shah@afp.org.uk](mailto:sheetal.shah@afp.org.uk) / 0207 091 9348) for Mukatji and Jyotiji to keep a record of all correspondence.