

# HAZARDS CENTRE

In the making

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## A BRIEF REPORT ON THE LAST NINE MONTHS March 1997

### **Early Background**

For several years I worked with the Shahdol Group in Madhya Pradesh who were trying to understand what a People's Plan for the district would look like. We finally realised something that should have been clear to us from the beginning itself - that a People's Plan has to be made by the people themselves. At best the role of middle class sympathisers like us is to help by supplying information which the people need. If we can give them news of what has happened elsewhere, what communities all over the world have been trying to do, and what have been the results of those experiments, then people may be in a better position to make their own intelligent choices and to plan how to make better lives for themselves.

Having learnt this lesson we spent several years more in Shahdol trying to provide information to workers, farmers, artisans, landless labourers, and students on different issues. We also experimented with many different kinds of presentation - through posters, film, booklets, theatre etc. - to get some idea of what appeals to people and helps in their understanding of a problem. It is obviously impossible to put down all that we learnt in those years in such a short space, but one of the main lessons was that information is used most effectively when people are organised and are asking for the information. We also realised that when leaders of people's organisations see that the information might be a danger to their own leadership, then they also try to stop the information from becoming available.

### **Delhi Experience**

When I left Shahdol in 1990 to come to Delhi I was given a chance to set up a Pollution Control Division in the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) headquarters at Delhi. WWF, after having spent almost 20 years trying to save wild animals, had begun to realise that unless nature was saved, wild animals could not be saved, and that the biggest threat to nature was from pollution and consumerism. So, in the Pollution Division we were able, for the first time, to bring together labour unions, affected citizen's groups, and scientists to discuss

the problems of pollution. For three years we organised small workshops all over the country to give more information to people about the nature and causes of pollution, simple ways of measuring pollutants, and the technical and legal methods of controlling them.

I was asked to leave WWF in 1993, probably because the management could not see how our work fitted into the kind of image that WWF had. Since then I have been trying to work as an individual, using all the experiences of the past many years to see how better to be able to help people who are struggling for a better life. Some of my time has been given to the People's Science Institute at Dehradun for this purpose. But it is not always easy to be of use without an institution to support the work. So, in 1996, some colleagues suggested that it would be good to set up some kind of institution - both to improve the assistance given to communities, as well as to give a chance to work for many young and enthusiastic individuals we were meeting. That is how the idea of a "Hazards Centre" was born.

#### **The Hazards "Centre"**

For this kind of Centre, the word "Hazard" is taken to mean "anything that is considered to be dangerous by communities of people". That, therefore, includes things like unemployment, displacement, harassment - things that are not normally considered to be hazards by technical people. The work of the Centre is:

1. to provide information on hazards;
2. to give training in how to measure the hazard;
3. to help in designing alternatives.

The Centre began work in July 1996, but it is not yet a formal or registered body. That is mainly because we have been exploring whether such a Centre is really needed. The Other Media (TOM), a voluntary agency which has been supporting people's campaigns, has kindly provided a desk in their office in Delhi and are meeting some of the office expenses. Some support comes from the People's Science Institute (PSI) at Dehradun. Otherwise, so far the work has been done by individuals who have given freely of their time and experience.

This note is now being circulated to give some idea of the work done in the last nine months and to ask for your participation and support.

### **Great Himalayan National Park**

Notification for this National Park has been issued in the Tirthan, Jiwa, and Sainj valleys of Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, covering an area of 630 sq.km. Six villages are supposed to be removed from the core area while almost 120 hamlets in the surrounding area will not be allowed to enter the Park for grazing or herb collection. The push for declaring the Park came from a study done in 1984 by two pheasant experts from Canada and the United Kingdom, who found that the area was a very good habitat for the Western Himalayan Tragopan, but was being spoilt by grazing. Some of the affected villages have formed a Kisan Mazdoor Haq Sangathan and have been asking for more information about the nature of the Park and whether they will be allowed to use it or not. In response to their request a short workshop was held for three days in which the details of the Park and its history were presented. This was followed by a discussion of how to study the existing area of the Park in order to assess whether the figures presented by the authorities were correct or not. This included studies of the number of sheep and goats grazing in the Park, the routes followed, the variety and abundance of grass and herbs, and the effect on wildlife. Members of the Sangathan then went on two trips through the Park and have come back with some excellent data which shows that there are major problems in the understanding of conservation in the Park by the government. A detailed report is under preparation.

### **Darlaghat Cement Plant**

Himachal Ambuja have opened a cement plant at Darlaghat in Himachal Pradesh. Part of the Darlaghat Sanctuary was denotified by the State Government for this purpose in spite of several protests by environmental groups. The plant is claimed to be one of the most environment-friendly in the country because Ambujas have installed glass-fibre filter bags for recovering all the cement dust that earlier used to be released into the atmosphere from cement plants. However, since the opening of the plant there have been several local complaints about the amount of air pollution. At the initiative of a local group (SAVE) field trips were organised to the cement plant and the mine site to study the actual situation. It was found that the major cause of dust at the cement plant was not what was coming out of the chimneys but what was sometimes leaking out from the filter bags and the huge number of trucks moving on kuchha roads. Mining was partly contributing to dust because of the movement of heavy machinery but the dangers of soil erosion, deforestation and drying up of springs were much greater. These findings were presented at a small meeting of local activists and a strategy

was chalked out of how to spread the available information in the affected villages as well as how to measure the actual effect of pollution and degradation.

### **Dakshin Kannada**

In the last few years several MOUs have been signed for about 30 large industries in and around Mangalore. These include the Cogentrix thermal power plant, Usha Ispat, Nagarjuna Fertilisers etc. A study sponsored by Danida has concluded that the setting up of these industries will not exceed the environmental capacity of the district. However, previous experience with the Mangalore Refineries and Pharmaceuticals Limited has led to several popular protests in the area particularly among fisherpeople and farmers. So several local organisations have come together to form the Dakshin Kannada Samrakshana Samiti to press for a proper development of the area. At a meeting at Mangalore a critique of the Danida study was presented as also possible ways of measuring existing pollution levels and challenging the official views through a people's perspective.

### **Singrauli**

The Rihand river was dammed in the 1960s to provide irrigation water to downstream areas of Uttar Pradesh. However, an aluminium smelter was built next to the dam to use the power and this was followed by a caustic soda unit and a carbon black factory. In addition, coal was found near the reservoir and this became the basis for the growth of the thermal power industry with five superthermal power plants being set up around the reservoir. Further to the north, there is also a lot of stone quarrying and a cement plant. All these developments in the last 35 years have created a certain amount of displacement as also pollution levels have gone up in the entire Singrauli region. In 1991 the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) commissioned an environmental impact study of the region by a French company. The study generally came to the conclusion that the impact was within the standards set by the government, that more thermal power generation could be accommodated, and that the only problem could be socio-economic (that is, the people displaced and needing rehabilitation). Responding to a request by the Banwasi Sewa Ashram (BSA) at Govindpur on the east bank, a PSI team has done some monitoring of pollution levels in the eastern side. A six-day workshop was organised with field workers of BSA to give them a good idea of what were the various pollutants and their impact. Later on, there have been a number of village meetings and BSA workers have begun doing surveys in their areas to document the pollution impact on crops, fruits, trees, and

human beings.

### **Delhi**

The Supreme Court, as part of a series of ongoing cases, has ordered the relocation of 168 toxic industries from Delhi in order to clean up the environment of Delhi. Almost 10,000 industrial units are to be relocated as part of this drive. This will affect lakhs of workers who are employed in these units. The Court has directed that this be done in accordance with the provisions of the Master Plan of Delhi. Several unions and public interest groups have come together to form the Delhi Janwadi Adhikar Manch (DJAM) to protect the interests of the workers. The DJAM has argued that 70% of Delhi's citizens live in sub-standard housing conditions, 35% work in factories and shops (mostly unauthorised), and only 17% of the air pollution is because of industries. In other words, both the Supreme Court judgement as well as the Master Plan, on which it is based, are biased and have not considered the needs of the majority of the population of Delhi. As part of the attempt to create an alternative way of looking at the city, residents of a number of unauthorised colonies are being helped to do surveys of their own colonies in order to come up with some reliable data about what is the exact situation of Delhi's citizens. This data could then become the basis for proposing an alternative Master Plan for the city which looks at what are the needs of the working poor and how they could be met.

Another interesting aspect of the possibilities in Delhi comes from an invitation that was extended by a teacher at the Kalyanpur Municipal school for girls (where only poorer working-class families send their children) to give a talk to her sixth standard section on environment. Most of these girls had rarely moved out of their residential colony on the east of the Yamuna river and were quite surprised to know that a river existed in the city. Three months later these girls had mobilised the others in the sixth standard - all 200 of them; they had each collected ten rupees from their mothers; and they all wanted to go on a trip along the river. The eight hours spent on four buses, seeing the river occasionally and some historical monuments like the Old Fort, were an unparalleled learning experience for both children as well as guides. The potential for repeating this on a more regular and extended basis is presently being explored.

### **Tijara**

The Supreme Court order regarding Delhi is likely to result in a number of industries being relocated to the nearby States. The Rajasthan Government is already offering major

incentives to industries to relocate in Alwar district. Land is being acquired for this purpose in Tijara tehsil. Villagers there are worried that not only will they lose their agricultural holdings but also that there will be no mechanisms to regulate the pollution from the relocated plants. They argue that what is toxic and non-conforming for Delhi could be equally so for their areas. Some of them have already resisted the attempt by Kedia industries to set up a distillery on the Delhi-Jaipur highway. So villagers from 16 villages in Tijara and Kotkasim tehsils have already issued "notice" to the Government warning them against acquiring land in their villages for the purpose of setting up anti-people industries. They are being helped to assess the real ecological value of their land so that acquisition by the government becomes more difficult.

### **Aravali**

The Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) at Bhikampura has been active for the last decade in building water harvesting structures and protecting the catchment areas in the Aravali ranges from indiscriminate mining. On their initiative a meeting was called at Jaipur to explore the possibility of writing an environmental status report for the Aravali. This meeting was very unsatisfactory as all the intellectuals from Jaipur combined to draft a Rs 21 lakh proposal for researching and writing the report. Later, another meeting was called at Bhikampura itself and all those groups involved in activity on the mining issue, whether with workers or with farmers, were invited from the Aravali region. The information offered by these groups on various aspects of mining and the discussions amongst them were very revealing. These were then collected and put together systematically in the shape of a draft environmental status report. The concerned groups now plan to call a larger conference in Jaipur to pressurise the Rajasthan government for changing the mining policy.

### **Eastern Ghats**

Requests were received from Agramee in Rayagada (Orissa) and Samata in Visakhapatnam (Andhra) to help in advising local protests against mining in their areas for bauxite and calcite. Some technical support was provided in analysing the environmental impact studies of these two units and suggesting how local communities could do their own studies. Short training workshops have now been asked for in these simple techniques. Both the groups have also initiated legal action. It is also being realised that the entire Eastern Ghats section is being opened by the respective State Governments for mining of natural resources and utilisation of

the coastal belt for setting up ports and industrial zones. Several other requests have been received from this region in this connection and it may be possible to bring them together into one consolidated effort.

### **Toxicology**

The basis of assessing hazards lies in the two major disciplines of toxicology and epidemiology. It was realised quite early on that the techniques and methodologies followed in both these disciplines were crucial in defining hazards. Hence, it was decided to do some research in these two areas. A preliminary draft of the work done in toxicology is almost ready. Three main conclusions are emerging from the study. Firstly, the techniques used have not been developed for Indian conditions but are heavily based on work done in the West. Secondly, the research priorities in Indian laboratories are being set by the needs of industry and business and have no concern for the problems of workers. Thirdly, short-term toxicity is being assessed for some chemicals but the findings are not being used to set standards, while long-term toxicity is not being researched at all. All these conclusions are very significant from the point of view of the kind of hazards that working communities are being "legally" exposed to, and for which they have no access to technical support and advice. The report will be circulated for comments once it is ready.

### **Other activities**

Some other activities taken up by PSI need to be mentioned here to give an idea of the range of the possible work. These are: research into flood protection and drainage schemes in North Bihar; water harvesting and urban supply in Udaipur; treatment of effluents from carpet units in Bhadohi; drinking water quality in Saharanpur; pollutants in the river Kosi in Rampur; and air and water quality in Mahasamund (Raipur). The effort in all these cases has been to equip local communities with information and skills that will enable them to recognise and measure the hazards in their environment and to find alternative solutions to local problems. In some cases this approach has succeeded but, in others, there has been a lack of continuous effort as well as confidence in being able to do their own research. Perhaps it will take much more experience and motivation on our own part to be able to help communities overcome this very genuine barrier.

### **Summary**

As I have mentioned before, the Hazards Centre is not yet a formal body. So all the activities outlined above cannot be really claimed to be those of the Centre. They have been initiated by local community groups and organisations and we

have helped out in our individual capacities with some institutional support from the People's Science Institute and The Other Media. All the individual time and skill has, happily enough, been given voluntarily and without any charge. In many cases, friends and colleagues have even refused to ask for their travel costs. Communities have also been very generous in meeting boarding, lodging, and even travel expenses. As the work increases, though, more full-time inputs will be required for training, research, and documentation. One of the areas that we would like to be much more involved in is that of industrial and occupational hazards. So far we have not been able to build up the necessary linkages with labour unions for this, but hope to do so in the coming months. For all this we hope to be able to mobilise the required resources. But before that, we ask for your comments and suggestions. Please do write back.

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