

Mercury Contamination from an Abandoned Thermometer Factory in Kodaikanal, India

Source: Greenpeace India and Sudhanshu Malhotra (photographer)

Hindustan Unilever Ltd., a majority owned subsidiary of Anglo-dutch multinational Unilever, wants to leave behind a ticking ecological time-bomb atop the Pambar Shola – one of the most biodiverse forest ecosystems in South India. The company's now-closed mercury thermometer factory is a toxic hotspot with elevated, even dangerous, levels of mercury recorded inside and outside the factory site.

During operations between 1984 and 2001, the factory admits to having discharged more than 1.3 tons of toxic mercury into the Pambar Shola. It also admits soils found inside the premises are contaminated with at least 366 kgs of mercury.

The factory was shut down by the Tamilnadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) in March 2001 after residents and ex-workers were exposed by the company's illegal dumping of mercury wastes inside Kodaikanal town and in the forests behind the factory. Currently, no settlement between HUL and the community has been reached.



Ashwini Beena, 18, suffers from depression and is epileptic. Severe consequence of mercury exposure affect numerous women, including complications in their reproductive health including irregular periods.



Predees and Prasana, 8-year-old twin brothers. Their mother G. Ruthpriya worked in the packing area and digital section at the mercury thermometer factory for 5 years (1995-2000), Predees suffers from an ulcerated tongue and Prasana has deformities in his legs. Both suffer from low IQ and asthma.



The beautiful hill station town of Tamil Nadu in Kodaikanal is famous for its holiday resorts and weekend getaways.



A memorial to Paneer Selvam who died of kidney failure at the age of 26. His urine levels of mercury were 320mg/dl (normal levels are 15-40mg/dl). Paneer worked as a gardener at Hindustan Unilever's mercury thermometer factory in Kodaikanal.



S. Sivaganam, 45, worked at the Hindustan Unilever Limited's mercury plant for about 18 years (1984-2001). Sivaganam has a brain tumor and has been under treatment for more than 13 years. He now spends about Rs. 4000 on treatment every month. Doctors say his tumor could burst at any time. At times, he walks the streets for hours just muttering to himself.



Fishes from the Kodai lake are still consumed by many, even though they have been proven to contain high levels of mercury.



The factory was shut down by authorities in 2001 after the discovery of an illegal dumpsite containing 7.4 tons of mercury-laced glass thermometers crushed in a stockpile. Even now, years after it was shut down, there appears to be no justice in sight for workers at the HUL factory in Kodaikanal - or their families. Photo credit: The News Minute.