

November 03, 2003

## The Mercury Menace

New Delhi, November 3, 2003: Toxic and deadly mercury imports into India have increased by six fold in the last seven years, reveals recently released data of the government. The world is phasing out mercury because of public health concerns and India is phasing in mercury, mindless of the enormous dangers of mercury contamination. "We are rapidly becoming the toxic dumping ground of the world's mercury," said Sunita Narain, Director, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), at a Conference on Mercury Pollution in India organised by CSE here today. "Is this the 8 per cent growth that Indian industry is promising us?" she asked. "We will become the world's dirt capital," she pointed out.

Mercury is highly toxic. Its compound, methyl mercury, is a confirmed neurotoxicant as it damages the developing brain. It is also genotoxic as mercury is known to pass through the placental barrier and the blood-brain barrier, putting the unborn at tremendous risk. It can cause severe and permanent damage to central nervous systems, lungs and kidneys, document studies from across the world.

The world has recognised this danger and rapidly moved out of mercury-based processes and products. The global production of mercury is on the decline, its use in most countries is severely restricted or banned. But the world needs a "market" and India has become a willing buyer of this deadly product.

Europe, for instance, has decided to phase out all its mercury-based chlor-alkali plants. It has over 13,000-18,000 tonnes of mercury that it will discard on the market. The US has excess mercury stocks. In the last seven years, Europe has sold over 3,000 tonnes of this toxin to us. "India has become the prime destination for sellers of death and disease," says Chandra Bhushan, associate director at CSE who has studied this issue.

"There is sufficient evidence that mercury puts human beings at risk, particularly, the weak and susceptible populations, and urgent action is needed to curtail this hazard," says Dr R.C. Srivastava, former deputy director, ITRC, Lucknow and co-chair of the mercury global assessment report drafting group.

According to the latest data released by the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics, Kolkata, which CSE presented before the conference participants:

- Mercury imports to India have more than doubled between 1996 and 2002 from 254 tonnes per annum to 531 tonnes per annum.
- Organo-mercury compound (pesticides, slimicides, biocides) imports have jumped by an incredible 1,500 times – from 0.7 tonnes to 1,312 tonnes– in the same period.
- India has now displaced the US as the biggest consumer of mercury. It consumes 50 per cent of the global production and processes 69 per cent of mercury.

Can we afford this growth? We already have high mercury contamination in the country. CSE presented a [mercury hotspot map](#) for the country at the conference. This map, which compiles all studies on mercury monitoring, shows contamination in surface water, groundwater, human hair, blood and in fish that we eat. The coastal waters were particularly deadly, with levels of contamination exceeding the allowed limit.

This, when we don't even know how much mercury we use, how we use it and where we use it. We do not regulate the products that use mercury in. In addition, coal use emits mercury and this unintentional use is not even considered in the assessments. We desperately need a tough policy to restrict and regulate emissions, said CSE.

Mercury has substitutes that are readily available. For instance, the chlor alkali industry, a key user of mercury, can switch to membrane cell processes. In fact, in 2003, the Union government gave a fiscal concession to this industry to promote a switchover. But industry wants time to continue its deadly operations. Similarly, substitutes are being used for medical equipment and for its other uses. But India has chosen to invest in what the world has discarded.

This is nothing but sheer mindlessness.— it is expensive for the economy and deadly for public health. We should leapfrog to clean substitutes. Because we cannot afford to become the world's dumpyard for toxic mercury. Remember, mercury is mobile, it moves across continents. It persists, it builds up in organisms (bioaccumulates) and moves up the food chain (biomagnifies). Therefore, the use of mercury is putting entire populations at risk. We must be mindful of this risk. The lives of Indians are not expendable. It is not less valuable than the lives of the people who live in Europe, US or Japan.

**[Mercury issue in-depth](#)**

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