

# BHOPAL NEEDS HEALTH SURVEILLANCE NOW



After the 1984 chemical disaster, the central government abandoned its health surveillance work in Bhopal far too soon and the state government's surveillance work includes only a very small sample of the population and does not cover such vital areas as health effects due to contamination (as opposed to those directly from the gas in 1984) and effects on the children of victims and survivors. Small scale and published studies indicate clearly that there are health problems that need to be documented and addressed and there is a great need for health surveillance.

## **Not Enough Information**

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) conducted health surveillance on about 84,000 members of the exposed population and 20,000 unexposed individuals as a control population. This surveillance programme was prematurely abandoned in 1994. 12 years later, their report has still not been published. We know only enough to be sure that more health surveillance is desperately needed. We know that gas survivors and victims of water contamination suffer higher rates of a wide range of health problems such as respiratory disease, eye diseases, gastrointestinal diseases, and general morbidity.

## **Water Contamination**

No official research agency has carried out any systematic surveillance among the population exposed to routine poisoning through contaminated groundwater. Small scale studies done by Sambhavna Trust among the population exposed to contaminated groundwater show that while the national percentage figure of anemia among women is 52%, in one community affected by groundwater contamination, the figure was 95%. In another community of 1500 individuals, Sambhavna found that every second person in the community was suffering from a multitude of symptoms such as abdominal pain, chest pain, fever, headache, and dizziness. This surveillance exercise also found that among females between 13 and 15 years, 43% had not begun their periods.

## **Cancer**

*Date of survey: July 2001-January 2003. Survey by: Sambhavna Clinic. Survey sample: 1528 individuals [819 male 54 %, 709 46 % female] from 270 families. Out of 1528 individuals (1175 individuals) 77 % are only contaminated water victim and (353 individuals) 23 % are Gas victim + Water Victim*



Also in desperate need of surveillance are the rates of various kinds of cancer in gas and contamination affected Bhopal. What little data exists suggests that cancer is a rising threat among contamination exposed residents of Bhopal. The rate of bladder cancer, for instance, is higher in Bhopal than anywhere else in India.

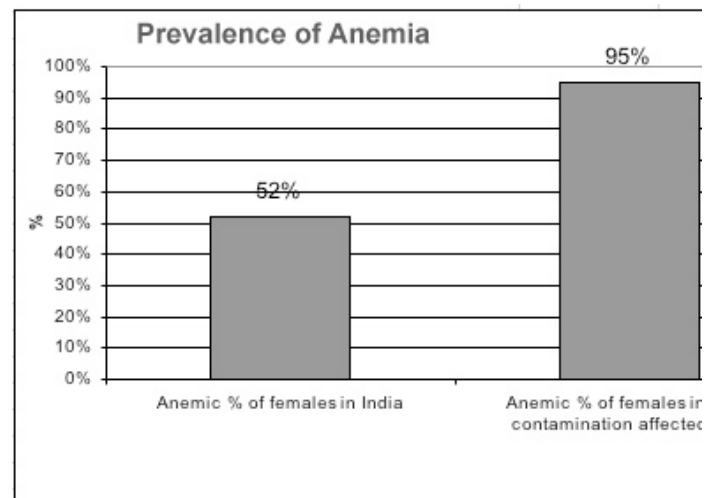
### Children of Exposed Parents

Another aspect of the gas disaster and local contamination is the effect it has had and continues to have on children born to exposed parents. A study carried out by Sambhavna and published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) in 2003 showed that children conceived and born after the disaster to exposed parents were significantly different from children of the same age who were born to unexposed parents. The children born to exposed parents were shorter, thinner, lighter, and had smaller heads. In the absence of more

extensive research and surveillance, it is likely that thousands of children suffering from birth defects are not even recognized as being affected by the Union Carbide disaster, let alone compensated for it.

### What Is Needed and Who Must Provide It

The central government must step in and initiate rigorous, long-term medical surveillance. The damage inflicted upon the people of Bhopal is long term, and surveillance of its effects must be likewise long term. This surveillance shall track vital statistics in the community, including infant mortality and morbidity, occurrence of particular diseases such as cancer, and



*"There is a definite rise in the incidence of different kinds of cancers in the gas affected population in the last few years. Cancer of the lungs is much higher among the exposed population in Bhopal in comparison to other cities in the country. Compared to 18 years back, today there is much more data on the mutagenic and carcinogenic effects of methyl-isocyanate. There was an urgent need for cancer screening, community health education, and proper system of registration of gas exposed cancer patients."*

-- Dr. Shayam Aggarwal, Bhopal's top cancer specialist and Director of Navodaya Oncology Center

occurrence of congenital malformations. The surveillance plan must be designed in a way that allows people in the community to play a role and to receive information and results directly and immediately.

**WE DEMAND that the central government set up a National Commission on Bhopal with the necessary authority and funds to initiate detailed and long term surveillance of health problems in people poisoned by Union Carbide / Dow Chemical and their children at least for the next 30 years. This commission must have active participation of non-government doctors, scientists, and representatives of survivor's organizations.**

**This padyatra is our march for justice and dignity until our last breath. 21 years is enough!**

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