

A toxic neglect in Bhopal

Technology is available if the authorities really want to deal with hazardous waste

It is nothing short of criminal that 33 years after what was one of the world's worst industrial disasters, 336 tonnes of hazardous waste are still piled up at the site of Bhopal's defunct Union Carbide factory. The minister for environment quite nonchalantly informed Parliament that no funds have been sought or any allocation made to dispose of the dangerous material. The government has identified technology with which it has dealt with 10 tonnes of waste, which seems far too little far too late. Till today, there has been unusual apathy towards dealing with the fallout of the disaster and the compensation for those who died and those who survived with grievous injuries and disabilities.

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There has been very little attempt so far to conduct an assessment of the groundwater around the area to examine how deep the chemicals may have gone and what effect this will have on the current generation and those to come. Studies show that the rate of cancer among the victims is 10 times higher than in the normal population. Surely, this cannot have escaped the authorities over such a long period of time. Chemical contamination of groundwater has affected thousands of people for several kilometres around the factory, yet nothing has been done to tackle this. In short, the factory, which once spewed out 42 tonnes of lethal methyl isocyanate all those years ago, is still killing and maiming people. The 336 tonnes of toxic waste are not the only danger. There are three ponds where waste has been systematically dumped as well as several sites within the factory premises where waste was buried. This underscores the need to frame a national policy to deal with contaminated sites.

The Bhopal case, which made international headlines and outlined how flimsy safety measures were in the factory and how easily those culpable were able to get away with minimum charges, should have been an eye-opener for successive governments and should have occasioned much stricter environmental laws to govern hazardous waste and industries that create these. There is no dearth of technology available across the world if the authorities really wanted to deal with this problem. The lack of safeguards is a problem in many hazardous industries, many of them in the unorganised sector. Until the issue of toxic waste, rehabilitation and continuing contamination of the surroundings and its effect on communities are addressed, the victims who live with crippling morbidities will have no closure.