

ABUSE OF THE MASS MEDIA BY THE INDIAN ASBESTOS INDUSTRY

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Historically, the burden of industrial pollution has reached the developing world much faster than the fruits of industrial growth. This visible sign of the global power structure is there for all to see, but certain crippling local factors contribute to accentuate this phenomenon. Weak politics, weak science and weak legislation – further impaired by half-hearted enforcement – is no match for a strong and defiant corporate sector, augmented by opportunistic use of the mass media. The story of asbestos follows this pattern. Projections suggest that the asbestos-related cancer epidemic may take more than 10 million lives before exposure to asbestos is brought to an end by banning asbestos globally.¹

Information suggesting an asbestos–cancer relationship was available as early as the 1940s. By the 1960s, enough epidemiological as well as experimental evidence existed to prove the relationship. For half a century the asbestos industry, in collaboration with some of the leaders of occupational and respiratory medicine, was able to suppress most of this data.² Meanwhile, millions of people were exposed to the carcinogen and hundreds of thousands died. For decades, asbestos manufacturers promoted widespread distribution and use of a known carcinogen, just to keep their profits intact. Now we have a job on our hands to combat this assault. The knowledge that asbestos causes cancer became public in the 1980s, not from revelations by the scientific community but as a result of a prolonged struggle, involving public activism and legal actions on behalf of asbestos victims, largely in countries where civic institutions were well-developed.

Since new asbestos use is being made increasingly difficult in the developed world, “global asbestos Inc.” is trying to create new markets in countries with weak legislation. Over 42 countries have banned all forms of asbestos, including chrysotile. Others have planned a 3-5 year phase-out of asbestos use. In the European Union (EU), although

some member States had their own bans in place, the deadline for prohibiting the use of chrysotile for all EU States was January 1, 2005 – other forms of asbestos having been banned previously. In contrast, Indian asbestos companies continue to flourish in a pro-asbestos climate. Rapid growth potentials are being used as a ploy to stall movement toward an asbestos ban. Market stakeholders have strong incentives.

They have influenced policy to effect a constant reduction in asbestos custom duties. Rising revenue and increasing manufacturing capacity of all major asbestos players make asbestos a “good investment” in the share market, according to financial analysts and advisors.³ New production units for asbestos-cement products are being established every 2-3 years. The vast majority of this hazardous product (80%) is used for rural low cost housing, schools and industrial structures. Recently, efforts were made to use asbestos products in tsunami rehabilitation projects, even when safer, non-flammable substitutes existed.

Seeking to dominate the Indian asbestos agenda, there has been an aggressive industry-sponsored misinformation campaign in the public domain. In 2003-2004, we saw a media blitzkrieg of pro-asbestos propaganda. Initially it started with full page advertisements^{4,5} in most of the national dailies and magazines, appearing on a regular basis. Then came a spate of special supplements, full page features and news stories. They were apparently authored by the asbestos-cement manufacturers but the credit line was either anonymous or belonged to the newspaper, providing much needed reach and credibility to the industry.⁶⁻⁸ Most of them misreported scientific papers and proceedings. The case of one such feature that appeared in The Indian Express is typical.

Special Feature in The Indian Express⁶

On July 15, 2003, a leading and highly respected Indian national daily – The Indian Express – published a full page feature entitled *Blast those myths about asbestos cement* in its main edition. It was described as a special feature. There was no credit line, and nowhere was it written that the feature was contributed by asbestos manufacturers. The feature, illustrated by colored photographs, had 2 five column articles, 1 triple column article, and 2 box items – full of misleading and quasi-scientific information.

Let us examine some key assertions made in the feature: that “mesothelioma is not reported when only chrysotile is used”; that this “conforms to western studies where no increased risk of lung cancer is found in asbestos cement factories where only chrysotile fibre is used”; that “asbestos sheets are of a non-toxic nature.” These statements are simply untrue. WHO Environmental Health Criteria-203 says that exposure to chrysotile poses increased risk for asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, and where safer substitutes for chrysotile are available, they should be considered for use.⁹ The International Agency for Research on Cancer states that all forms of asbestos are known carcinogens, and all have been shown in epidemiological, clinical and laboratory studies to be fully capable of causing lung cancer, mesothelioma and a whole range of asbestos-related diseases.¹⁰ Leading scientific journals have opined that chrysotile, like all other forms of asbestos, is a potent human



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carcinogen, and that the amount of chrysotile asbestos already released into the environment creates a situation where exposure to chrysotile products remains the leading cause of mesothelioma in the world.^{11, 12} To rationalize its stand on asbestos, the Express feature goes further and asserts: "...disease would occur with a prolonged exposure of 5 to 20 fibers per cc over a period of 40 years. The current Indian exposure is less than 1 fiber per cc." What WHO Environmental Health Criteria-203 says on the issue is that no threshold has been identified for carcinogenic risk.⁹

The author of this article made all of these facts available to the Editor of the Express, pointing out that:

- ◆ the readers of the Indian Express had a right to be informed of these facts as well;
- ◆ since it was not made clear that the feature was contributed by industry, readers would take it to be an Express authored feature and that, unless counter-arguments were published, the newspaper would be serving the purposes of industry by providing them with a platform, using the credibility and reach of The Indian Express;
- ◆ such one-sided coverage could hardly be justified as part of the "chrysotile debate."

The newspaper failed to respond to repeated communications and rejoinders from this author (Jul 18, Jul 24, Aug 5, and Nov 17, 2003).¹³ Nor did it publish the scientific facts countering its feature.

Expressing her disappointment on publication of this feature, Laurie Kazan-Allen of the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat wrote to the Express on August 4, 2003:

"...For over one hundred years, asbestos has been used commercially in a wide range of products. From 1896, concerned individuals began to report a high incidence of disease amongst asbestos workers in England, France and elsewhere. With time, Western countries realized that asbestos was a lethal substance and banned its use. Unfortunately, global asbestos producers decided to continue their trade in this class 1 carcinogen and targeted users in developing counties. It is appalling to realize that a substance which is mined in Canada and is deemed too hazardous to be used at home is exported

to India. The Canadian asbestos industry continues to profit while workers and the public in India continue to die from asbestos-related disease. There is no excuse for the continued use of this material.

In September, 2003, Canadian and international experts will be attending a conference in Ottawa, Canada entitled: Canadian Asbestos: A Global Concern. This meeting aims to expose the double standards of the Canadian asbestos industry in continuing this deplorable trade. I suggest that if your journalists truly wish to appreciate the extent of the damage done by asbestos, they cover this conference. We will have speakers from India at the conference who will inform the delegates of the deplorable asbestos legacy which your country has suffered and continues to suffer as the use of asbestos continues..."¹⁴

This letter too failed to generate any response from the newspaper. However, after a good five months, on December 11, 2003, the newspaper published a small double column piece in its middle pages, providing some scientific facts on chrysotile and condemning asbestos-industry propaganda.¹⁵ This may have been purely coincidental since the piece made no reference to the July 15 feature. The damage was already done.

The unabashed abuse of power and wealth by the Indian asbestos industry continues under the garb of freedom of expression. Web-based electronic newspapers are following such stories.¹⁶ Counterpoints and protests are either ignored or appear in small inconspicuous letters. We can't expect a dramatic change in the character of the mass media; it is not simply a case of funding. In fact, the corporate sector owns most of the channels of mass communication by proxy. Financiers have acquired direct control over editorial policies and space for independent opinion has been pushed to the margins. In this climate, there are no level playing fields and the asbestos industry is likely to enjoy extensive clandestine support from hidden persuaders. Such a big-business-media nexus can only be neutralized by public awareness and the concerted perseverance of scientific associations. A misinformation campaign promoting asbestos is being conducted in public, without any visible opposition. What is being marketed as debate is largely doctored by the industry. The only way out seems to lie with an organized intervention by academics and health professionals in partnership with concerned individuals. It would be fatalistic to say that academics don't stand a chance against the media onslaught. Even a single vote matters and can set in motion huge changes.

