



I was 21 years old when I joined the workforce of Hindustan Ferodo's Ghatkopar factory in the north of Mumbai (1973). I worked there for 33 years until 2006, when the factory, now called Hindustan Composites Limited (HCL), was closed down and workers were compelled to take early retirement under a voluntary retirement scheme.

My brother used to work for HCL and suggested that I get a job at the factory. I did not have any idea of the factory or what it manufactured. When I started, I was given the job of maintaining the machinery in the asbestos textile manufacturing section. There were two machines with 116 spindles and my job was to ensure that these machines operated smoothly. Our section produced yarns of polyester interweaved with asbestos fibers for making fire resistant textiles.

When I started work at the factory, neither I nor my colleagues knew anything about asbestos or its health effects. But during the course of our work, we noticed warning labels about dangers on drums and bags. Company officials did not tell us anything about the dangers of asbestos or the safety measures we needed to protect ourselves from hazardous exposures. It was only in 2004, 31 years after I started working with asbestos, that I came to know about the health impact of asbestos, through an initiative of our Union

and a health check-up at the factory gate by members of the Occupational Health and Safety Centre. The factory management never told us anything. There were periodic health check-ups conducted by the company, which were done frequently earlier, but later infrequently. No data or diagnosis reports were ever shared with us. The company doctors looked at our health reports and X-rays 6-7 months after the check-ups or tests were done and never told us anything.

Although we were not told about the harm of asbestos, we were sometimes given cotton masks to wear. There was no air suction machine fitted in the production unit to remove dust. Our workplace used to be very dusty and workers were always covered with a layer of white dust. Now I know that many of us were exposed to dangerous levels of asbestos fibers while working in the factory due to poor working conditions. I know of at least 20 of my co-workers who died in their 50s. One of my colleagues died of cancer; he was in his 40s. There are two more that are now battling with throat and lung cancer. I used to be an athlete once, now if I even walk a little faster or climb a few flights of stairs, I am breathless. I can't even run a few paces. I was diagnosed with asbestosis during the 2004 factory gate medical check-up.

Neither HCL nor the government has done anything to help the injured workers who were exposed to asbes-

tos. While the company flatly denies the occurrence of such exposure, the Government has never stepped in to do anything beneficial for the workers. Moreover, a case filed by our Union on behalf of 36 exposed workers in 2005 in the Court is being indefinitely delayed and in the last three years only 7 to 8 workers have been cross examined.

I took voluntary retirement in 2006 after fighting the company's illegal closure of the Ghatkopar factory. I have a family of four to support. The money I got through voluntary retirement is my only source of income.