



In 1965, I joined Ahmedabad Electricity Corporation (now known as Torrent Power) as a casual worker. I was given a job as helper in the boiler room of the company.

I am an illiterate person. I come from Chandkheda, a small village near Gandhinagar. I was 25 years old when I came to Ahmedabad city looking for work. We had a large family and needed to support them. So I took the first job I got.

My job was to assist the skilled masons in the boiler room who did the insulation work on boilers. We used to remove or add the white insulation material packed around the boilers. There were 10-15 casual workers working with me in this section. In 1980, I was given permanent job status in the factory.

When I joined the company, I and my co-workers had no knowledge of asbestos or its effect. No one ever told us anything about it. Certainly the company did not. The only thing we knew was our factory generated electricity from coal. In fact, we used to casually handle the "white material." Due to poor maintenance in many places the insulation lining was exposed. We used to playfully throw handfuls of this "white material" at our co-workers.

The company never gave us any training for safety or protection. And as a casual worker, you cannot even ask for anything, your job is very insecure. Casual workers are treated very badly,

given low wages and the most dangerous kinds of jobs in factories. They are not allowed to even unionize.

For the first 15 years of my job in the factory, while I was a casual worker, I did not get the benefit of medical check-ups that the company conducted every 2-3 years for permanent workers. After I became a permanent worker, there were medical check-ups done, but I and my colleagues never knew what the company doctors did with our reports or what were the findings. In 1990, I started developing breathing problems. I could not lift heavy objects, working, walking, talking everything became a problem. Every breath I took was painful. The company did a health check-up and said I was fine, there was no problem with me. Then why can't I breathe properly, why does it hurt so much? I did not understand.

I went to Raghunathbhai Manwar, a trade union representative in our factory, who took me to see a retired doctor, Dr. Arthur C. Clarke. They told me about asbestos and its effect on workers who get exposed to it. Dr. Clarke helped me to get a proper diagnosis of my medical condition; he also did health check-ups of my co-workers. Raghunathbhai helped to identify other workers in a similar situation. We learned we had a disease called "asbestosis." We did not know what it was, but understood that we have got this disease because of that "white material" we worked

with. Finally, in 1995 I had to quit work in the boiler room due to my failing health and started working in the office on menial jobs.

In 1996, a lawyer named Rani Advani from the Consumer Education and Research Centre helped 8 of us, who were diagnosed with asbestosis, file a case in Gujarat High Court for compensation. The Court ordered the National Institute of Occupational Health to examine us. Two of the workers died before the NIOH could examine them. Two of us were diagnosed with asbestosis by the NIOH. While the High Court kept deliberating our case, my colleague Kishan Goplani died. The court ordered an interim compensation of Rs10,000 (US\$ 250) be paid to me in 1997.

Meanwhile my failing health, need for medical attention and on top of that my inability to do any work was putting a lot of burden on my family. They threw me out of my own house. So I started begging near Ramji Temple to support myself. From an able-bodied worker, I was reduced to an infirm old man.

In February 2008, I received Rs160,000 (US \$4000) from the company as an out-of-court settlement. I guess I was lucky to get this money. But many of my co-workers, at least 15-20 of them, who were with me in the boiler room, were not. They died quietly, painfully and in penury.