

Tatas in Bhopal

The 1984 gas disaster in a Union Carbide factory in Bhopal is the worst industrial disaster in human history. Known as the "Hiroshima of the Chemical Industry" it has so far killed more than 20,000 people and injured many thousands more. Recently, Ratan Tata, CEO of the Tata corporation has offered to clean up the toxic chemicals in the soil and groundwater around the abandoned factory site. Survivors of the disaster and their allies worldwide strongly oppose this proposal.

What is Ratan Tata's proposal?

In a letter to Planning Commission, dated November 28, 2006, Ratan wrote that he was willing "to lead and find funding for remediation of site above and below ground" in Bhopal. The proposal consists of setting up a trust with contribution from other corporations, including Dow, for the purposes of cleaning-up the abandoned Union Carbide Factory site. The UPA government is now considering this proposal. This proposal completely goes against the "polluter pays" principle enshrined in Indian law and will interfere with the lawsuits against Carbide and Dow that are pending in Indian and US courts.

Why are the survivors opposing Tata's proposal? Don't they want the site to be cleaned up?

Obviously, the survivors don't want to keep on getting sick and dying everyday. They want the site to be cleaned up immediately. However, they also want the clean-up to be done the right way. This means following Indian laws that are based on the "polluter pays" principle. Justice will be served if Union Carbide and their new owner Dow Chemical pay for the clean-up. Only then, we can use legal oversight to make sure that the clean-up is done properly. If Tata does a poor job, we can not ask them to fix it later.

Too often in India, crimes by rich corporations go unpunished because they have friends in high places to pull strings for them. We will not let it happen again. We will not let Carbide and Dow to subvert the course of justice. The survivors want to set a precedent that the rich are not above the law. Only then, their dream of "no more Bhopals" will come true.

Don't you think that Ratan Tata wants to help the survivors in Bhopal?

Ratan Tata is not motivated by humane concerns. If so, he wouldn't have waited 23 years. He wants to help Dow and has explicitly said so in the US-India CEO forum in March 2006. The survivors' campaign has made it impossible for Dow to make money in India. Ratan Tata wants to pay for the clean-up so that Dow can do business in India. Obviously, Tata and other companies will also financially benefit from the increase in trade. So, Ratan Tata's offer is just another financial investment for him. The people of Bhopal are not a factor in his scheme.

Such plans are consistent with Tata's long history of choosing profit over people. J. R. D. Tata was one of very few Indians to condemn the arrest of Warren Anderson, the then CEO of Carbide, after the disaster.

Haven't Tatas always been good for India?

Tatas may have done a lot of good but their history is mixed. Just consider these examples:

- Collaborating with the British regime including supplying opium to China
- Doing business with the brutal junta in Myanmar even when other MNCs like Pepsi are pulling out.
- Forcibly taken over tribal lands by bulldozing villages to build mines and factories
- Violently suppressed many popular protests even killing people at Noamundi and Kalinganagar
- Industrial wastes from mining and manufacturing operations have poisoned air soil and groundwater at numerous sites like Mithapur, Patancheru, Jugsalai, Bokaro and Sukhinda.

Ratan Tata's ulterior motive is to fatten his wallet at the cost of the poor and the powerless.