

About 10 m workers are exposed to silicosis in India. But the State does not care

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With silicosis eating away at his lungs, Mukesh Chaganbhai's frame is wracked by coughing fits, breathlessness and fever. (Khambhat, 2009) (MINT)

In a strict message that pollution-related deaths cannot be brushed under the carpet and that those responsible for failing to stop them and pay compensation to the victims will have to pay heavily, the Supreme Court on Monday directed the Gujarat government to release more than Rs 7 crore as compensation to the families of 238 workers, mostly tribals, who

died of silicosis after working in Godhra's quartz and stone factories. It also pulled up the head of the Central Pollution Control Board, the agency that is mandated to monitor such issues, after he did not show up in the court to explain steps taken for preventing the death of workers due to silicosis. The court also underlined that the Gujarat government had failed to comply with the directives of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in 2010 on monetary compensation to people who have died due to silicosis.

Read | Silicosis deaths: Ten years later, SC orders Gujarat govt to pay up(
<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/silicosis-deaths-ten-years-later-sc-orders-gujarat-govt-to-pay-up/story-IXL2u6xKxoeHwg70SwXecM.html>)

Silicosis is one of the oldest occupational diseases which afflict workmen exposed to free silica dust. But the sad part is, according to a Toxics Link report, that the disease is not being identified and most cases of it are still being counted as tuberculosis. This is because silicosis renders the respiratory system vulnerable to infection, which in turn becomes a terminal disease. About 10 million workers are exposed to silica dust in India.

Read | Villagers in MP's tribal pockets haunted by silicosis deaths(<http://www.hindustantimes.com/bhopal/villagers-in-mp-s-tribal-pockets-haunted-by-silicosis-deaths/story-snUM0YxtLBjyblCu83ZNfM.html>)

The NHRC recommendations on the disease are comprehensive and instructive. According to it, the occupational health and dust survey on a half yearly basis must be made mandatory in suspected hazardous industries and all workers must be examined before entering employment; the workers should get protective gear for silicone-prone industries and dust control devices should be installed among other things. Silicosis is a compensable injury enlisted under the Employees' State Insurance Act and Workmen's Compensation Act. So, the NHRC says, a separate silicosis board has to be formed in every state.

Read | The National Human Rights Commission recommendation (http://nhrc.nic.in/documents/recomm_silicosis.pdf)

But, as with everything in public health, despite rules, regulations, guidelines, government and NGO awareness programmes much has not been done in this regard. This scheme is very low on the priority of the State. This attitude is reflective of the State's cavalier attitude to marginalised sections that are forced to take up this kind of work even at the risk of death.

Read | Silicosis, the curse of Khambhat(<http://www.livemint.com/Home-Page/5fGuJN7WRSWrjRSnflbW3J/Silicosis->

the-curse-of-Khambhat.html)