
India: Local villagers rallied against polluter paper mill

The Kali Bachao Andolan (Movement to Save the Kali) made a dramatic move against the serious pollution that the West Coast Paper Mills (WCPM) is causing to the Kali River by discharging untreated effluents. For long local people have suffered enormously from the pollution as they were repeatedly threatened with job losses if WCPM was pressurized to be environmentally responsible.

On 30 September, villagers from worst affected Kariampalli, along with representatives of Environment Support Group, Parisara Samrakshana Kendra, Alternative Law Forum and Samvada, rallied through the Dandeli town and entered the WCPM campus in time for the Annual General Meeting.

Shareholders were met with individually and pressed to hold their company's leadership accountable for their lax environmental management and criminal neglect of affected communities. Clearly caught off guard, and deeply embarrassed, Mr. Chandak, Executive Director of WCPM, offered to meet with key 'leaders' of Kali Bachao Andolan. He was told that he must meet all, or none would meet him.

In over two hours of deliberations that followed, Leo Saldanha, speaking for KBA and the affected villagers, charged the company with:

- * Willful negligence causing serious pollution of the Kali River, and its ecology and extracting water far in excess of consented quantities.
- * Causing grievous injury and harm to villagers downstream of the effluent discharge point.
- * Criminal neglect of villagers affected by the pollution incident which on 29/30 June 2003 led to an epidemic outbreak of gastroenteritis and death (see <http://www.narmada.org/related.issues/kali/documents/cm.complaint.20030714.html>).
- * Lax approach to statutory warnings requiring the company to install a state of the art effluent treatment plant. Further, carelessly discharging fly ash from the power plant, including in a local college campus.
- * Gross violation of production limits set, as the company was on record that it was producing more than twice the consented quantity. This resulted in more fresh water intake, and doubling of pollution, with consequent adverse impacts on public health and environment.
- * The regulatory authority appears to have colluded with the company by not examining report details and failing to take appropriate action.
- * The company has behaved in a manner as to threaten the local communities with dire action if they questioned its errant behaviour.

Mr. Chandak had little to offer in explanation. He was also unable to deny any of these charges. Consequently he made the following commitments:

1. WCPM will undertake the expenses of providing drinking water to all villages affected by pollution of Kali due to discharge of effluents.
2. WCPM will invest in a mobile medical unit to provide immediate health relief to affected villages.
3. WCPM will accept monetary claims from all affected families. These claims would include cost of

loss of income and livelihood due to disease, death and disease of cattle and failure of crops.

4. One year's livelihood support would be extended on claim to Jahnu, a Gowli who suffered acute renal failure, and also his sister-in-law, who lost a new born infant, due to pollution from WCPM. Mr. Chandak also confirmed that the production process would be modernized to make it elemental-chlorine free, but not soon.

This protest marks an important departure in the nature of events in Dandeli; local people have now been shown the way ahead in negotiating a better deal for themselves and those who work in this large paper mill.

Article based on information from: "KBA Protest Enters West Coast Paper Mills", press release 6 October 2003, issued by Environment Support Group, e-mail: esg@bgl.vsnl.net , on behalf of Kali Bachao Andolan; "Epidemic Outbreak of Gastroenteritis and Death due to Pollution of Kali River by West Coast Paper Mills",

<http://www.narmada.org/related.issues/kali/images/dandeli.protest.html>