

Plith luv me

RAJU CAN BARELY TALK. The few words he gets out are hard to decipher.

'Thista,' he cries and his sister knows that he has been hurt again. Thick-tongued syllables burst from the depths of him.

'No me!' Each word is laden with unspoken significances. 'No me!' means, 'I'm cross and upset! I won't put up with it!'

Bullies have thrown stones at him and hurt him.

Poor Raju. He's a pathetically easy target. Twelve years old with the mental age of a toddler. He shambles. He's bald. His hair began to fall when he was three. He has webbed fingers. Webbed toes too. His tormentors call him 'baldy' and 'monkey'. They choose heavy, sharp stones and let fly.

The child who was born different clenches a webbed fist, but he does not hit out, does not throw stones back. He can't understand why he has been attacked. His head and body are bruised where the stones hit. Tears stream down his face. 'No me!' he shouts.

'Bald monkey,' they jeer, and more stones fly.

The boy runs back to his house. 'Thista!'

Sister, also in tears, hugs him, tells him that she loves him.

'No me,' cries Raju. He is so angry that he won't eat.

His mother Jashoda Bai is at her wit's end. She's obliged to be out working all day. It's ten years since her husband, Paswan, Raju's dad, was mugged on his way home from work and killed when he fought back.

Mum sorts onions, green chilies and garlic at the wholesale vegetable market. Three pence is her wages for grading 50 kilograms of onions and garlic, ten pence for sifting 50 kilograms of green chilies. Sheer dogged hard work, ignoring burning eyes, and the dust that makes her choke, earns Jashoda forty or fifty pence a day. It's not enough for both rent and food. The family often go hungry.

'Ek,' mumbles Raju. It means 'one'. He is asking for one rupee to buy a lemon ice from the stall across the road. Jashoda never refuses him the coin.

She is worried about Raju's speech. She took him to a government hospital. The doctor prodded in his mouth. 'So what's the problem? Got a tongue, hasn't he?'

'These big people,' Jashoda says bitterly, 'they treat us poor with contempt. But we are not fools. We know what is going on.'

There is something going on that no one in Bhopal officialdom will talk about. It is an epidemic of unnatural births. Thousands of children are being born malformed, or with brain damage, or, as in poor Raju's case, both.

Blind, lame, limbs twisted or missing, deaf-mute, brain-damaged, with hare-lips, cleft palates, webbed fingers, cerebral palsy, tumours where should be eyes: these are the children of Bhopal. The living children. The stillborn often can not be recognised as human.

For a developing baby, the safest place on earth should be its mother's womb, but these children were born to mothers in



PHOTO: DAVID GRAHAM

whose wombs and blood and breast milk poisons flowed.

The poisons got into their drinking water, via wells, bore-pipes and underground streams. They came from a derelict pesticide factory where, in sheds open to wind and rain, lethal powders sift from rotting sacks, tars ooze from rusting oil-drums, and barge-loads of toxic sludges lie dumped in lakes whose liners perished long ago.

The factory is that same one that, 25 years ago, leaked a huge quantity of poison gas over Bhopal, killing thousands in a night of horror.

The company that made, stored and abandoned the chemicals flatly refuses to clean the site. Each year's rains wash more poisons into the earth to begin journeys to new wombs. No action is taken. The polluter is a powerful and wealthy multi-national corporation which holds out the promise of major investment in India if liabilities relating to Bhopal are quashed.

So keen are politicians to deny the poisoning that a senior government minister came to the area and in front of journalists drew some well water and drank a glass, 'to prove' it was safe.

What the reporters did not see was that two minutes later he was behind a house with two fingers down his throat, desperately trying to get it up again.

Now all this may serve to make us angry, but what good is anger if we don't do something about it? There is something practical we can do right now to help Raju and other children.

In Bhopal there is a clinic called Sambhavna. The name means *possibility*. It was founded in the mid-nineties by survivors of the gas disaster and today is the only place in Bhopal where people poisoned by the contaminated water can get free medical care.

All who come, no matter how poor or threadbare, are warmly welcome. The majority of the clinic staff are themselves gas-affected or come from areas where the water is poisoned.

To be treated with genuine respect is such a new experience for some who come to the clinic that they break down in tears. Others, used to being charged fees they can't afford, are amazed to find that there is nothing to pay. All consultations, medicines, therapies and treatments are completely free.

Where people need operations we raise money to pay for them. Clinic staff give blood for people who can't afford to buy it, and have before now voluntarily gone without pay to buy a sorely needed piece of equipment.

Says Hafizur Rahman, a Sambhavna patient, 'A good doctor is one whose kindness alone removes half the illness. This is what we have here. This place doesn't thrive on money, but on love.'

So we come back to Raju and what we can do to help him. He needs speech therapy and physiotherapy, and a car so his family can have a break. Most of all he needs love. Buckets of it. He needs to play with other children in the gardens of Sambhavna (where we grow 90 kinds of herbs for use in medicines) and forget fear and tears and learn to laugh again.

Will you help us? Our work depends wholly on the generosity of caring individuals. Please don't just turn the page. You are much needed. Please help us.

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