

# Spotlight



- Exposure to mercury or its toxic compounds damages the central nervous and endocrine systems, kidneys and other organs. Prolonged exposure results in brain damage.
- Mercury is toxic to fetuses and infants. It can have severe neurological consequences,

preventing nerve sheaths from forming. It can also cause kidney dysfunction, memory impairment, and insomnia.

- The symptoms include vision, hearing, and speech impairment, disturbed sensation and a lack of coordination.

## S Sivaganam, R Vijayalakshmi, Peter Sunderajan, Christopher Coldcraft, Panneer Selvaram, J Sudhakaran, Neelavanan, Ramachandran, P Natrajan, S Palniswamy, Ganna Sundri, G Ruthpriya, C Carmel, Margaret, E Ramesh Selvapandiyam...

They are not just residents of Kodaikanal. They have a few other things in common as well. The kidneys, hearts, and brains of most of them are damaged. They have a constant headache and suffer from bouts of giddiness, shivering, bleeding gums, memory loss, and skin allergies, and also have to live with birth defects in their children.

More than 1,000 workers have been exposed to the mercury vapours from the obsolete thermometer factory of Hindustan Lever Limited, which has been dumping toxic mercury waste down the hill slopes of Pambar Shola forests. A study by the department of atomic energy (DAE) says mercury levels at Kodaikanal, at 1.32 mg per cubic metre, are about 2,640 times higher than the permissible level of 0.5 – 10 nanogram per cubic metre.

The factory was shut down in 2001 when locals found huge chunks of mercury waste dumped at a scrapyard in Kodaikanal. The company was later forced to clear 289 tonnes of toxic waste from the nearby areas.



Kodaikanal, a small town that is famous for its holiday resorts and weekend getaways



People fishing at Kodaik Lake. Studies have shown that the fish in the lake have very high mercury content and should not be consumed



Hindustan Lever Limited's mercury plant at Kodaikanal

PHOTOS: SUDHANSHU MALHOTRA

# mercury menace

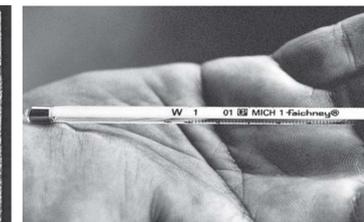
Workers at Hindustan Lever Limited's thermometer factory in Kodaikanal are suffering from damaged hearts, brains and kidneys, says **Sudhanshu Malhotra**. The story in pictures



Ruby Martine, 78, is the mother of Christopher Coldcraft, who worked at HLL's mercury plant from 1985 to 1991. Christopher had written to the management asking that his department be changed as he had health problems. Christopher had to resign as the company didn't change his department. He passed away on a Wednesday in February 1997 because of kidney failure. Every Wednesday, Ruby offers flowers from her garden to his grave. Christopher was her only support. With no income, the old lady survives on any money or food given by her relatives or neighbours



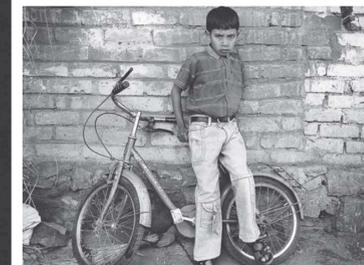
Preedes and Prasana are eight-year-old twin brothers. Their mother, G Ruthpriya, worked at HLL's plant from 1995 to 2000, in the packing area and digital section. Preedes is suffering from ulcers in his tongue and Prasana has bent legs. Both have low IQ and suffer from asthma



A mercury thermometer produced at the plant. Mercury thermometers are banned in Europe and are being phased out in most developed nations



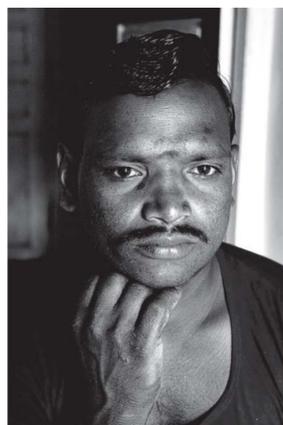
E Ramesh Selvapandiyam, 42, worked in the rough air passing area of the plant from 1985 to 1988. Selvapandiyam complains of shivering, giddiness, and poor eyesight, and has discoloured patches on the skin. He had to have 14 teeth removed because of excessive bleeding from the gums. The dearth of jobs at Kodaikanal forced Ramesh to shift to Coimbatore six months ago, but he kept coming back to visit his parents and other family members. About 200 families have moved to other places because of lack of job opportunities and medical facilities



Yesudas is the son of C Carmel, who worked at the plant for 16 years (from 1984 – 2000). The valves of the eight-year-old's heart are damaged. Doctors recommend a surgery that will cost Rs 2 lakh. However, his father cannot afford it as he already has to repay a loan of Rs 65,000 taken for his treatment



Nine-year-old Nitish's mother, Margaret, worked at the HLL plant from 1996 to 1998. The 32-year-old, who used to work in the packing area and digital section, complains of constant headaches, poor eyesight, shivering and giddiness. Nitish is mentally challenged since birth and goes to a special school. He cannot talk or even walk on his own



S Sivaganam, 45, worked at HLL's plant for about 18 years (1984-2001). Sivaganam has a brain tumor and has been under treatment for more than 13 years at a cost of about Rs 4,000 a month. At times he walks the streets for hours talking to himself. Doctors say his tumor could burst any day

Every bottle of mercury comes with this label, which clearly states that the use of mercury without proper precautions could be lethal. However, the company used to have the labels removed before handing the bottles over to the workers

**POISON**

**METALIC MERCURY**

Avoid Skin Contact. Emitte toxic vapours especially when heated. Monitor adequately. Avoid ingestion. Do not allow empty containers. Dispose in accordance with local, state and local regulations.

**DATA SHEET**

HAZARD TARGET ORGAN

SYNTHESIS

USE

1. BURN & REGULATORY SYSTEM

2. EYES

3. EYES & SKIN

4. EYES

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