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Eyes wide shut

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On February 15, French President Jacques Chirac made a dramatic announcement — the decommissioned aircraft carrier Le Clemenceau, which was waiting off India's territorial waters pending a clearance from the Supreme Court, was recalled to France. The ship would not end its life on the coast of Gujarat. The old glory of the French Navy was to be brought back to the naval base in the port town of Brest in Brittany "at least for a period of time".

Many believed that this announcement saved the French government some embarrassment, since President Chirac was due to begin a state visit to India four days later.

In India, though, it had to do with more than just embarrassment. It was the end of a fierce campaign, in which the media and several political parties (particularly the Left) had participated. Chirac's decision was taken as a great victory — rich countries and former colonial powers would not be allowed to dump their waste on poor India.

But, as always happens in such media campaigns, the real problem was skimmed over, and everyone closed their eyes to the continuing jeopardy for the lives of tens of thousands of poor people working in

asbestos factories across India. Lobbies engineered the “diversion” of the problem, and throughout the entire controversy, it was as if no asbestos existed elsewhere in India.

It all reminded me of the famous Down to Earth scoop. In August 2003, the environmental magazine published a report from the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), showing pesticide residues in major soft drink brands sold in the open market in India. Here again, the “imperialists” were blamed. The title of the article was ‘Colonisation’s dirty dozen’.

The Pollution Monitoring Laboratory of the CSE made public its analysis of the contents of 12 soft drink brands sold in Delhi. “The PML tested the cold drink samples for 16 organochlorine pesticides, 12 organophosphorus pesticides and 4 synthetic pyrethroids — all of these are commonly used in India as insecticides, in agricultural fields as well as at home.”

Organochlorine pesticides (lindane) were found in all cold drink samples. “This deadly insecticide damages the body’s central nervous system as well as immune system and is a confirmed carcinogen.” In some drinks, the concentration amounted to 42 times the 0.0001 mg/l EEC limit — a set of standards stipulated by the European Economic Commission. On an average, lindane concentration in all brands was 0.0021 mg/l, or 21 times higher than the EEC norm.

Now, I am not a speaker for these American cola companies. Indeed, I never drink the stuff, and why would I, when I live in the land of chai? But as other facts began to emerge, I found myself wondering: why blame the US cola companies alone?

Subsequently, a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) “on pesticide residues in and safety standards for soft drinks, fruit juices and other beverages” was constituted, and the MPs made their report public. At the outset, it enumerates the different Acts and Rules under which the use of pesticides is regulated in India. In a land where “more rules” equals “less action”, the list lets us understand that the problem does not only lie with the “colonisers”. The list reads:

- 1 The Insecticides Act, 1968, and Rules, 1971

- 2 The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986
- 3 Hazardous Waste (Management & Handling) Rules, 1989
- 4 Water (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1974
- 5 Air (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1981
- 6 Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1954
- 7 The Factories Act, 1948
- 8 The Bureau of Indian Standards Act

Despite their hard work in pinpointing so many acts and rules, the legislators forgot the most important one: the Representation of People's Act, which governs the politicians of this country. The immediate outcome of this act is that politicians have to run for votes. The best way is to offer subsidies to farmers at the cost of the latter's health, and that of the population in general. Free electricity and, consequently, the depleting of aquifers is another catastrophic result of this rush for votes, but that is another issue altogether.

The report of the JPC begins with a surprising statement: "The Committee have been informed that pesticide consumption in some of the major countries is as follows: USA: 7.0 Kg/ha, Europe: 2.5 Kg/ha, Taiwan: 17 Kg/ha, Japan 12 Kg/ha, Korea: 6.6 Kg/ha, India: 0.5 Kg/ha... From the above, it is noted that in India pesticide consumption is far less vis-a-vis other countries." It however adds that there is still "the problem of pesticide residue in food products which mainly percolate from fruit and agriculture crops".

The trouble seems to be that "other countries" are using degradable pesticides, which are not persistent; that is not the case in India.

All this came back to mind recently when I fell ill, as did my family and neighbours. A large number of people known to me were unwell with a sore throat, lingering cough, breathing problems, giddiness and severe headaches, and all this for more than two weeks.

The doctors were unanimous: the fault lay in the heavy spraying of cashew fields in our area. Today, farmers are encouraged (and given subsidies) to use DDT and other pesticides, which are banned elsewhere, to "protect"

their crop. Astonishingly, as in the case of asbestos, the cost of healthcare to the farmers and the local population is never taken into account when the government decides its agricultural policies.

We have just celebrated Earth Day, and everybody was duly reminded about the preciousness of Planet Earth and our personal responsibility to keep her alive. Can we expect the government take the lead in this and set an example?

The JPC was, however, right to pull up the major cola companies for “misleading” the public by claiming that their products were safe, although it was not as if they were pouring liquid pesticide into the bottles. But nothing can be safe for us in India unless DDT and other harmful pesticides are banned as well.

Down to Earth admitted: “The JPC report outlines a comprehensive agenda for change in the areas of pesticide policy, water security and public health” but nothing is being done by the government. It rightly questioned: “Is the government brave enough to create a new world?”

While I was unwell, I read two news articles. In the first, from an Indian paper, President Abdul Kalam exhorted Indian scientists to formulate plans for generating 50,000 MW of nuclear power by 2030. According to current plans, the government expects the country's installed nuclear power capacity to reach 24,000 MW by 2020.

The same day, the French daily Le Monde reported about a huge (for France, at least) demonstration against nuclear energy. More than 20,000 people walked through the streets of Cherbourg opposing the construction of a third-generation nuclear reactor. Everyone remembered Chernobyl, 20 years earlier. Undoubtedly it is not an easy proposition to cater for India's rising energy demands, and the compromises made during the President Bush's recent visit were certainly directed towards this objective.

My only point is that it does not help India to always place the blame on a more environmentally-aware West, for all its ills. The predicament is in India, and as long as the government does not decide to take hard and perhaps unpopular decisions, we will continue to be sick during the

spraying season. If India is truly to shine or become "Incredible India", she can not have a short-term view on environment and her people's health.