

AN INQUIRY INTO
the **Death** of **Ten Tannery Workers**
at the **Common Effluent Treatment Plant**
in **Ranipet** Tamil Nadu
on **January 31, 2015**

A Fact-finding Report by Cividep India



Introduction

Ten workers drowned in toxic sludge in the early hours of Saturday, 31st January 2015 on the R.K. Leathers tannery premises. The tannery is situated adjacent to a Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) in Ranipet, Tamil Nadu. Both R.K. Leathers and the CETP are located within the Tamil Nadu Small Industries Development Corporation (SIDCO) Industrial Estate in Ranipet.

The surge of toxic slurry was caused by a breach in the concrete wall of the CETP storage tank, which caught the sleeping workers unawares. The victims and survivors of the mishap were all employees at R.K. Leathers. Of the dead workers, one was a security guard from Tamil Nadu, while the other nine were migrant workers from West Bengal. One of the three survivors was injured.

Cividep sent a fact-finding team to Vellore and Chennai, which made enquiries between 2nd and 8th February 2015. Student volunteers in West Bengal interviewed the families of the victims on 11th and 12th February 2015. Those interviewed or met included tannery workers from the Ranipet area and from West Bengal, the victims' families, government authorities, activists from civil society organisations, engineers, and workers at the CETP. The meetings took place in Chennai, Ranipet, Vellore, Ambur, North Arcot district in Tamil Nadu, and West Midnapore district in West Bengal. Some of the information provided here is sourced from the print media.

The purpose of the fact-finding was:

1. To gain a clearer understanding of what had occurred that night.
2. To identify the root causes for the mishap, as well as the systemic, institutional and managerial failures that contributed to it.
3. To find out whether adequate compensation has been given to survivors and the victims' families by the company and the authorities.
4. To provide information to civil society organisations that are attempting to obtain justice for the victims, and ensure that such tragedies are not repeated.

The Common Effluent Treatment Plant (SIDCO Industrial Area), Ranipet

The industrial town of Ranipet is among the important tanning centres in India. There are about 280 tanneries operating in the area. Of the six common effluent treatment plants envisaged for the treatment of effluent from tanneries, three are now operational. The common effluent treatment plant managed by Ranipet SIDCO Finished Leather Effluent Treatment Co. Ltd is located at Plot No. 99, SIPCOT (Phase I) Industrial Estate in Ranipet, around 120 km from Chennai on the Bangalore highway. It is also known as CETP-SIDCO.

The CETP was established in 2001 after 86 tanneries came together to form the Ranipet SIDCO Finished Leather Effluent Treatment Company, which is

registered under the Indian Companies Act and is governed by a board of directors drawn from among its members. The number of tanneries now operational is 76.

According to a 2001 UNIDO report¹, the CETP was the seventh to be commissioned for the treatment of tannery effluent in Tamil Nadu as a part of UNIDO's Regional Programme for Pollution Control in the Tanning Industry in South East Asia. CETP-SIDCO was floated by the Ranipet SIDCO Finished Leather Factories/Tanneries Association. When it first became operational, the CETP had some innovative features, like being operated



Ranipet SIDCO Finished Leather Effluent Treatment Co. Ltd

by a team of women and reusing water from treated effluent for the irrigation of inedible plants. These practices have reportedly ceased.

Of the total project cost of INR 24.2 million, 50% was obtained as subsidy from the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Government of India. 20% was contributed as equity by the tanning companies, and the remainder was obtained as a loan from the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI). Together, the factories are now contributing 35% of the operating costs. The overall management of the CETP is carried out by the Board of Directors. The day-to-day administration is in the hands of a plant manager, a post which was occupied by a qualified environmental chemist when the plant first began operations. A Chennai-based firm called Enkem Engineers reportedly designed the plant.

Effluent from 76 units is presently treated at the CETP, which has the capacity to treat 2500 cubic metres of effluent per day. The tannery units together are reportedly generating revenue worth INR 5 billion per year. In total, 15,000 workers are said to be employed in these factories. The cost of operating and maintaining the plant and the repayment of the investment amount was covered by monthly contributions from member companies, according to their respective production capacities.

Of the tanneries currently using the CETP's treatment facilities, 65 are said to be connected to it directly, while the rest send effluent to a collection well. Gravity lines and pumping lines have been installed. Around 90% of these lines are laid along the roadside, while the remaining criss-cross through public and private property.

¹ United Nation Industrial Development Organisation, Regional Programme for Pollution Control in the Tanning Industry in South East Asia. "Common Effluent Treatment Plant, SIDCO, Ranipet, India" (September 2001). Available at <http://leatherpanel.org/sites/default/files/publications-attachments/sidco-dossier.pdf>

After collection, the effluent is pumped to tanks to be treated through the reverse osmosis (RO) process. Residual water is pumped back to the tanneries for reuse. Part of the sludge that settles during the RO process is pumped to sludge drying beds, while the rest goes to the filter press for dewatering. The dewatered sludge is deposited in Secure Land Fill (SLF) tanks. Regulation states that only dewatered sludge is to be stored in these tanks.

Some of the factories which run CETP



The Incident

Around 600 cubic metres of wet waste or slurry containing toxic and reactive agents like ammonium, chromium and hydrogen sulphide gushed out of the SLF tank when one side of the 15 foot high structure collapsed. According to an engineer, the toxic chemicals in the slurry produce hazardous gases and exert pressure on the walls of the tank.

The wall collapsed at 12:10 am, causing the sleeping workers to be buried alive in the slurry, which piled up to a height of 8 or 10 feet. The workers were sleeping in the accommodation provided on the R.K. Leathers premises adjacent to the CETP

Solid sludge storage tank that broke-15ft high x 100 ft wide x 800mts long (L shaped)



tank. The security guard Sampath was sleeping in the security kiosk, about 50 feet from the tank. A few of the workers were sleeping in an open shed about 20 feet away from the kiosk, while some others were asleep in a room without a door, about 10 feet from the shed. The level to which the slurry had risen was still visible on the walls of the workers' accommodation two days later.

View of the broken wall that could not withstand weight of liquid. Chemical reactions increased pressure.



Security room and place (leather storage shed cum accomodation). 10 workers were sleeping and drowned in the sludge at 12.50am on Saturday.





W.B Workers were sleeping in the room (on left) in leather drying shed (on right). Slurry was 8 ft high, marks can be seen.

The rest of the workers who lost their lives had been hired by a contractor. The post mortem was conducted at Adukkamparai Government Medical College Hospital, Vellore District on the day of the incident. The bodies of the nine workers from West Midnapore district in West Bengal were sent back to their villages by train from Chennai the same night. Sampath's body was also sent back to his village in neighbouring North Arcot district the same day.

One of the survivors, Palani, was a security guard like Sampath. Amirul, a second survivor, was a migrant contract worker from West Midnapore.

Security Room where Sampath, a security guard from Kannamangalam in Arcot District died. He worked at Arkay Leathers next to CETP. Has three children. One child is suffering from cancer.



Tank was constructed to store solid sludge containing less chemical contents

Possible Reasons for the Mishap

By design, the SLF tank is supposed to store only solid rejects. It was built six months ago around an existing SLF tank that had reached capacity. The new tank was 800 feet long (L-Shaped), 100 feet wide and had 15 foot high walls. The CETP's failure to ensure scientific design and construction, and slack supervision of the effluent management process are likely to be the immediate reasons for the mishap.

Permission to build the tank was to be obtained from the Chennai Environment Management Company of Tanneries (CEMOT), but the CETP failed to do so. It was reportedly constructed without the

approval of district level authorities of the Tamilnadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB). However, it later came to light that TNPCB officials had accepted a bribe to overlook violations in the SLF tank's construction and use.

Local actors alleged that the company had sought and received the Public Works Department's (PWD) certification of safety for the tank just ten days before the incident, despite cracks in its wall, which had been hastily patched with plaster and cement. If this information is indeed true, the PWD authorities responsible for issuing such certification need to be held accountable.

View of the patch works. Tank is six months old-Suffered frequent leaks-Walls patched and small tanks built to collect the leaking effluents.



Broken wall-Thinner than the required thickness. Rs. 3.5 crores was sanctioned, but only Rs. 1.25 crore was spent for construction.

The problem had first become apparent two months before the incident, when the company began to dump wet effluent in the SLF tank. The Hindu quotes the chairman of TNPCB, K. Skandan, as stating that “the landfill is supposed to be used to store only dry sludge after the effluents go through a filtration press”². The process of drying the waste had allegedly been bypassed to avoid operation and maintenance costs. Mr. Skandan also called the SLF tank “illegal”.

The wall breached when it could no longer sustain the pressure of the volatile liquid slurry. The TMMK, trade unions, local media sources, engineers at the CETP and workers have alleged that the thickness of the wall was only 9 inches, whereas regulation requires it to be built in a tapering manner with a broad base. Moreover the tank lacked a strong

² “TNPCB ignored violations by tanneries.” The Hindu (February 2, 2015). Available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tnpcb-ignored-violations-by-tanneries/article6845659.ece>

foundation, and the walls were not supported by pillars. Steel rods with a diameter of 22 mm to 26 mm and with anti-corrosion properties are supposed to be used in its construction. However, rods of only 6 mm or 9 mm diameter were used.

Providing accommodation within factory premises where hazardous chemicals are stored or hazard processes take place is against the provisions of law, and has in this case proved fatal. As a rule, workers in these tanneries are not made aware of the health hazards that they face, or of safety measures that they can take. They are also not given proper protective gear. This is also the case at the CETP, where workers reported that chemicals in the effluent were causing skin problems and breathing difficulties.

Negligence and Lack of Due Diligence Regarding Safety

There are allegations that the CETP had been disposing of hazardous wet waste in the SLF tanks for a long time. According to *The Hindu* (02/02/15)³, TNPCB officials were aware for months of the presence of an illegal storage facility. TNPCB chairman K. Skandan has admitted that the second SLF tank did not have the requisite permissions, and that this had been identified during an inspection the previous year. The management at the facility had been warned against using the SLF tank for storing wet effluents by the District Environmental Engineer (DEE) as recently as 9th January 2015.

One of the four members of the company's Board of Directors had reportedly foreseen the problem, and resigned some months earlier.

Violation of Environmental, Industrial and Labour Laws

a. The Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979

Section 12 of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 requires contractors to issue a passbook with the workman's photo and details of employment, among other things. In addition to this, Section 16 directs contractors:

- (c) to ensure suitable conditions of work, having regard to the fact that they are required to work in a State different from their own State;
- (d) to provide and maintain suitable residential accommodation to such workmen during the period of their employment;
- (e) to provide the prescribed medical facilities to the workmen free of charge;
- (f) to provide such protective clothing to the workmen; and
- (g) in case of fatal accident or serious bodily injury to any such workman,

3 <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tnpcb-ignored-violations-by-tanneries/article6845659.ece>

to report to authorities of both the States and also the next-of-kin of the workman.

Under Section 25, the penalty for not following the provisions is imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year, or a fine which may extend to one thousand rupees, or both.

The Act also empowers Inspectors of Labour from the Labour Department to enter premises of establishments and verify that the Act has been followed. It is clear that the labour department of the state of Tamil Nadu had also failed to enforce provisions for the safeguard of migrant workers.

b. Regulation or Monitoring of the CETP by the State Board

1. The Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974

As per Section 25 of the Act, previous consent of the State Board is necessary to establish any industry operation or process, or any treatment and disposal system, or an extension or addition of the same which is likely to discharge sewage or trade effluent into a stream, well, sewer or on land.

It is pertinent to note that it is not completely clear whether the CETP had the TNPCB's consent or approval for the second SLF tank to begin with. Allegations in the media and from local groups suggested that the board had not approved the construction, but a case of corruption in relation to the tank's misuse came to light later. It can be surmised that this also extended to the matter of its construction.

More importantly, the Act also makes it the responsibility of the TNPCB to conduct inspections of the CETP facilities. It states that

[...] the State Board shall inspect sewage or trade effluents, works and plants for the treatment of sewage and trade effluents, and review plans, specifications or other data relating to plants' set-up for the treatment of water, works for the purification thereof and the system for the disposal of sewage or trade effluents or in connection with the grant of any consent as required by this Act.

A. HAZARDOUS CHEMICALS

NAME OF HAZARDOUS CHEMICAL	QUANTITY	TYPE OF HAZARDOUS CHEMICAL (TOXIC, INFLAMMABLE, CORROSIVE, IRRITANT)	MODE OF STORAGE	DETAILS OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN
1. WATER	NIL			
2. PRODUCT	NIL			

B. HAZARDOUS WASTE

IDENTITY OF HAZARDOUS WASTE	QUANTITY GENERATED (DAY)	STATE OF WASTE (LIQUID, SOLID, SLOTTED, SLUDGE ETC)	TYPE OF HAZARD	QUANTITY OF ACTION TAKEN	MODE OF STORAGE AND DISPOSAL
1. CHEMICAL SLUDGE	17	SLUDGE		1975	PARTIALLY SECURE LAND FILL REST WITHIN THE PREMISES

C. TRADE EFFLUENT

SOURCES OF GENERATION	QUANTITY GENERATED (IN KLD)	MODE OF TREATMENT
FROM MEMBER UNITS	2500 1780 (29/1/2015)	PHYSICAL CHEMICAL BIOLOGICAL TREATMENT

D. EMISSIONS

SOURCES	QUANTITY GENERATED (IN K/M)	CONTROL MEASURES

Board-Hazardous waste treatment



Effluent from CEPT flowing amidst green and thick vegetation.

2. Hazardous Wastes (Management, Handling and Transboundary Movement) Rules, 2008

These Rules were made by the Central Government in exercise of the powers conferred by Sections 6, 8 and 25 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 (29 of 1986), and in supersession of the Hazardous Wastes (Management and Handling) Rules, 1989. Under Schedule 1 (Serial no. 30), wastes from leather tanneries, i.e. chromium bearing residues and sludge, are included under the category of industrial wastes known as Hazardous Wastes.

Sludge flowing into the drains

Among these, the Rules that may be relevant to the Ranipet case are given below. 'Occupier' refers to a person who has control over the affairs of the factory or the premises, including matters relating to any hazardous waste.

(3) Responsibilities of the occupier for handling of hazardous wastes.

- (1) The occupier shall be responsible for safe and environmentally sound handling of hazardous wastes generated in his establishment.
- (5) The occupier shall take all adequate steps while handling hazardous wastes to:
 - (i) contain contaminants and prevent accidents and limit their consequences on human beings



and the environment; and

(ii) provide persons working on the site with the training, equipment and the information necessary to ensure their safety.

(18) Treatment, Storage and Disposal Facility for hazardous wastes.

1. The State Government, occupier, operator of a facility or any association of occupiers shall individually or jointly or severally be responsible for, and identify, sites for establishing the facility for treatment, storage and disposal of the hazardous wastes in the State.
2. The operator of a common facility or occupier of a captive facility shall design and set up the Treatment, Storage and Disposal Facility as per technical guidelines issued by the Central Pollution Control Board in this regard from time to time, and shall obtain approval from the State Pollution Control Board for design and layout in this regard from time to time.
3. The State Pollution Control Board shall monitor the setting up and operation of the Treatment, Storage and Disposal Facilities regularly.
4. The operator of the Treatment, Storage and Disposal Facility shall be responsible for safe and environmentally sound operation of the Treatment, Storage and Disposal Facility and its closure and post closure phase, as per guidelines issued by the Central Pollution Control Board from time to time.

25. Liability of occupier, transporter, operator of a facility and importer.

1. The occupier, importer, transporter and operator of the facility shall be liable for all damages caused to the environment or a third party due to improper handling of the hazardous wastes or disposal of the hazardous wastes.
2. The occupier and the operator of the facility shall be liable to pay financial penalties, as levied for any violation of the provisions under these rules by the State Pollution Control Board with the prior approval of the Central Pollution Control Board.

3. Compensation to Victims

Compensation provisions fall under the Workmen's Compensation Act, the relevant portion of the Act being Section 3(1), which reads:

If personal injury is caused to a workman by accident arising out of and in the course of his employment, his employer shall be liable to pay compensation in accordance with the provisions of this chapter.

The compensation is calculated according to extent of injury, years of service of the workman, etc.



Ranipet-SIPCOT-accident(C)



Ravi, a survivor.

Government and Other Stakeholders' Response to the Incident

After an investigation on the 4th February 2015, a team of three Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) officials and one Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI) scientist held the Ranipet SIDCO Finished Leather (Tannery) Effluent Treatment Company Private Ltd squarely responsible for the disaster.

The State Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM), G. Ramakrishnan, demanded that INR 1,000,000 be paid in compensation for all the victims. S.R. Devadas, the Secretary of AITUC Vellore stated that the government should take control of the effluent treatment plant as more than thirty people had died from effluent poisoning in Ranipet, Ambur, Pernambut and Vaniyambadi. L.C. Mani, the Secretary of the local CPIM chapter, conducted a protest demonstration in Ranipet. Member of Legislative Assembly R. Sharath Kumar of the Samatuvu Makkal Katchi party demanded an enquiry and action against those responsible for the accident. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) held a protest march in Ranipet on 5th February 2015. Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) party leader S Ramados demanded that murder charges be filed against those who violated safety regulations. Ministers Mohan and K.C Veeramani of the ruling ADMK party demanded immediate action against the plant and promised to provide relief to the victims' families.

Manjunatha, the Inspector General of Police for North Zone, Vellore, Tamil Chandran, the Deputy Inspector

National Disaster Response Force



General of Police for Vellore and Senthilkumari, the Superintendent of Police for Vellore visited the site of the accident. The seventy-six tannery units connected with the CETP plant were subsequently closed.

The National Green Tribunal (Southern Branch) Bar Association filed a petition with the National Green Tribunal (Southern Bench). Vasanth Kumar, the Village Administrative Officer for Karainavlock, Ranipet lodged a complaint against the management of the company running the CETP on the request of the local (SIDCO) police station.

A local political party called the Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam (TMMK) held widespread protests and played a proactive role in agitating for compensation for the migrant workers who had lost their lives.

Action Taken

A case was registered against the company under Sections 337, 304(ii) and 285 of the Indian Penal Code. These Sections of the IPC hold the accused culpable for causing hurt by an act endangering life or personal safety of others, causing death by negligence, and negligent conduct with respect to fire or combustible matter respectively. R. Amirthakatesan, the Managing Director of the company running the plant, and two other directors, Jayachandran and Subramanian, were arrested.⁴

The National Green Tribunal ordered the company operating the Central Effluent Treatment Plant to pay a penalty of INR 7,500,000 based on the 'polluter pays' principle. The compensation money was to be deposited by the company with the Department of Environment and Forests of the Government of Tamil Nadu. INR 2,500,000 would go towards relief for the families of the ten victims, while the balance of INR 5,000,000 would remain with the Department.

The counsel for the State Government and the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board, Abdul Saleem, stated that a sixth member, a structural engineer, had been added to the five member expert committee constituted for the purpose of probing the incident. In keeping with the directions of the Tribunal, the committee would look into the structural integrity of the infrastructure facilities at all eight CETPs in the district including the one at Ranipet. The government also formed a Multi-Disciplinary Group (MDG) to inquire into the accident and recommend steps to prevent future mishaps.

A Case of Corruption

The State government transferred the case to the Crime Branch of the Central Investigation Department (CB-CID) on 5th February 2015. On the same day, the

⁴ "MD, two directors of Ranipet firm held." The Hindu (February 8, 2015). Available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/md-two-directors-of-ranipet-firm-held/article6869775.ece>

TNPCB suspended three of its top officials in Vellore, and began an inquiry into omissions and irregularities. Those suspended were Joint Chief Environmental Engineer Charles Rodriguez, District Environmental Engineer P Kamaraj, and Assistant Environmental Engineer M Muralidharan.

On 30th March, Kamaraj and Muralidharan were arrested for accepting bribes to the tune of INR 200,000 from the management of the Ranipet SIDCO Finished Leather Effluent Treatment Company to not take action against several irregularities. They were booked under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988. Their bail plea was dismissed on 18th April after the Public Prosecutor, T. Rajasekhar, strongly opposed the plea on the grounds that if let out on bail, the two accused were likely to tamper with the documents and the witnesses.

Compensation Given to the Families

All victims had initially been promised compensation of INR 700,000 from the Ranipet SIDCO Finished Leather Effluent Treatment Company Private Limited, and INR 300,000 from the Government of Tamil Nadu. This was announced by Mr. Nanda Gopal, the District Collector for Vellore, Mr. Manila, Tehsildar for Ranipet, Mr. Manivanan, District Revenue Officer for Vellore and Mr. Ashok Kumar, District Superintendent of Police for Vellore.

The National Green Tribunal directed the company to pay a penalty of INR 7,500,000 to the Tamil Nadu government for pollution and environmental destruction. The money was to be handed over to the Collector and divided between the victims' families (INR 2,500,000) and the relevant government department (INR 5,000,000). A local stakeholder claimed that there has been a demand for another INR 2,500,000 for the victims' families. Initial interviews conducted by Cividep in February revealed that none of the families had received the compensation money. Survivors were supposed to receive INR 25,000.

The West Bengal government announced INR 200,000 as compensation for the victims from the state. The families received cheques for that amount in February. Follow up conversations with the families in mid-May revealed that compensation from the Tamil Nadu government and the company had finally reached them around the beginning of the month. There was some confusion as to the exact amount tendered as compensation by the company, with some quoting INR 500,000, while others quoted a sum of INR 550,000. Additionally, the Government of Tamil Nadu had handed over compensation to the tune of INR 300,000.

Meetings with Victims' Families

The fact finding team met the family of Sampath, the security guard from Tamil Nadu. He is survived by his wife, Kavitha (35) and their three children. One of the three, a 12 year old, is a cancer survivor. Sampath had joined R.K leathers three months before the incident because of financial problems, without the knowledge



Sampath's house



Discussion with Sampath's family members

of his family. They only became aware of this fact after his death.

Members of the team travelled to the villages of Dingapur and Phulberia in West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur district to interview the families of the nine victims, other workers from factories near R.K. Leathers who had been sent back, and a survivor, Amirul Chaudhury. Out of the nine, brothers Shah Jahan Mallik and Qutubuddin Mallik and a third worker called Sukur Ali Mallik hailed from Phulberia village. Habib Khan and his two sons Ali Akbar Khan and Ali Asgar Khan, brothers Asiar Khan and Agram Ali Khan, and another young worker called Piar Khan were from nearby Dingapur village.



Sukur ali mallik's family

The victims' family members are daily-wage earners who work as labourers on farms and in other trades. They are either landless or own very small holdings. The workers had migrated to Tamil Nadu in search of better employment, and earned approximately INR 6000 per month, of which they would send home INR 4000. Some families were entirely dependent on the income from tannery workers in Ranipet, and lost all earning members in the mishap.

The migrant workers had never received employment contracts or other proof of having worked at the factory, such as identification cards (ID cards) and

Dingapur



appointment letters. All nine had taken their voter ID cards and ration cards (which qualified them for certain essential food items at subsidized rates under the Public Distribution System) to Ranipet, in order to apply for a newly instituted Provident Fund (PF) scheme. Only Sukur Ali Mallik, Shah Jahan Mallik and Qutbuddin Mallik's families received their death certificates and post-mortem reports in February. The families of the other victims only received the documents by April.



Family of 2,3&4



House of 2, 3, 4

When they were interviewed in February, the families stated that members of the local and district administrations in Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal MLAs, and members and leaders of the ruling party had been in constant touch with them since the incident. All the families had received cheques for INR 200,000 from the West Bengal government, as promised. They had also been promised housing. Moreover, they had received between INR 15,000 and INR 25,000 from local authorities and the party administration for funeral arrangements.

It was only in early May that the family members reported receiving the INR 300,000 promised by the Tamil Nadu government, and INR 500,000 or INR 550,000 in compensation from the company. The father of two of the victims, and the aunt and cousin of another reported this to be the case. Additionally, a neighbour and friend of the families in one of the villages confirmed this information. However, there were conflicting reports on the exact amount paid to the families by the CETP company. Opinion was divided between INR 500,000 and INR 550,000.

As the victims' government-issued identity cards had been lost at Ranipet, the families were only required to produce their photos and ration cards at the District Supply Officer's (DSO) office in order to receive the compensation money.

Meetings with Workers from Other Factories

Most of the workers from other factories said that they had not been given

protective gear during the course of their tanning work. They were given boots, gloves and masks only while handling toxic slurry. The victims' families also stated that the workers had not been warned about the hazards involved in their work. They were all unaware that wet slurry was not supposed to be stored in the SLF tank, and that it was in a precarious state.

Workers also alleged that the smell from the chemical sludge had made it impossible for them to continue living and sleeping in the first floor factory accommodations. It can be surmised that this was the reason for some of the workers choosing to sleep in the open yard adjacent to the tank. One worker had fallen ill, and would vomit any food he took. Some suffered from a fever, though it is not clear whether this was related to the proximity of the sludge-filled tank.

Discussions with general public and engineers



Views of the Central Leather Research Institute, Chennai and the Chemical Industries Association, Chennai

The Director of the Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI) Dr Asit Baran Mandal declined an interview in February, citing the on-going investigation in Ranipet. Incidentally P. Shanmugam, the deputy director of CLRI, was a member of the four-person team which inspected the CETP premises on Wednesday, 4th February 2015.

According to Mr N.S. Venkataraman, the Secretary of the Chemical Industries Association, the technologies used in the tanning and effluent treatment processes were of a high standard and were not to be considered responsible for the incident. Mismanagement and negligence on the ground were the direct causes of the tragedy. He emphasized that the incident was not a reflection on the performance

of tanning and effluent treatment technologies. He was also of the opinion that the onus of responsibility should not be placed on the CETP management alone, but that the TNPCB, the labour inspectorate and other concerned government departments should be held equally responsible.

Meetings with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)

In February, the Secretary of CITU Chennai S. Kannan put the team in touch with Kasinathan, the District Secretary of CITU Vellore. In Ranipet, Kasinathan and Babu gave details of the incident and stated that the CITU was putting forward demands for compensation to be delivered to the Tehsildar of Ranipet, so that it would reach the victims directly. On 6th February 2015 CITU held a rally in Muthukadai, Ranipet, seeking solidarity from local people to ensure that justice was done to all the victims, including the migrants.

Meeting with the Tamilnadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam (TMMK)

During discussions with the leaders of the TMMK, it came to light that the CETP management and the authorities had tried to send the victims' bodies back to their villages after post-mortem without any declaration of compensation. They had also been in the process of sending all other migrant workers back to West Bengal, allegedly to prevent them from testifying to the government, police and the media. On the police's request, the first FIR had been lodged by the village administrative officer of the local Panchayat (local government), instead of by workers or local groups acting in their interest.

The TMMK intervened and mobilized other workers from West Bengal, local residents, trade unions and civil society groups. They deputed volunteers to guard the bodies after post-mortem to prevent them from being sent back without an assurance of compensation. On being detained, the group refused to get into the police vehicle till the Tehsildar, who is the highest government official at the Taluk level, and the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) of Vellore had promised compensation to the tune of INR 700,000 from the management and INR 300,000 from the Tamil Nadu government to each of the victims' families.

Fact-finding by People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) Members

Cividep team members met Dr V. Suresh and D. Nagasaila of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) Chennai and Pondicherry on 4th February, 2015. T S S Mani, the District Secretary of PUCL Chennai organized a team to travel to Ranipet for a PUCL fact finding exercise. TMMK representatives, CITU members of the People's Forum (Kancheepuram) and members of the Women's Collective, Ranipet were also invited to join in the exercise.

Key Findings

1. There were grave lapses at the time of construction of the second SLF tank. Legal stipulations concerning design and construction were disregarded. This could have been the result either of an attempt to minimise cost and effort, or of gross negligence.
2. Regulations regarding the storage of treated effluent in the Secure Landfill tank were disregarded. It can be surmised that this was to reduce the time, effort and money involved in transporting, storing and drying the effluent at a suitable site.
3. The company had not received mandatory approval or clearance for the second SLF tank.
4. The mishap was the direct result of corruption on the part of TNPCB officials, who accepted a bribe to overlook the violations.
5. The workers were not provided accommodation at a safe distance from the slurry-filled SLF tank. They were also not informed of the dangers involved. The tank's proximity caused at least one worker to become ill. We can also surmise that it was a direct cause of death for those who had been sleeping in the open shed instead of in their room on the first floor.
6. The bodies of workers would have been sent back to West Bengal without a declaration of compensation if the TMMK and other local actors had not become involved.
7. The victims had not received any identity proof or paperwork from the management that proved their employment.
8. Their voter identity cards and other government-issued identity have not or cannot be recovered.
9. The compensation from the Tamil Nadu government and the company running the CETP reached the victims' families only at the beginning of May 2015.

Conclusion

The CETP's failure to ensure that the tank was designed and constructed in a scientific manner, and slack supervision of the management of treated effluent were the main immediate reasons for the mishap. It has been alleged in the media and by local groups that regulations regarding the construction of the tank and the storage of treated effluent were disregarded in order to cut costs and reduce effort. It has also been established that the Ranipet mishap was the direct result of both corruption and dereliction of duty on the part of the regulatory body, i.e., the TNPCB.

It is not known whether there was any collusion between the contractor who eventually built the second tank and the CETP management. If the PWD had indeed certified that the tank was safe, it becomes pertinent to ask if corruption had played a role here too. Moreover, providing accommodation to workers within factory premises where hazardous chemicals are stored is against the law and proved fatal in this case.

JCBs clearing the sludge-3rd day after the tragedy



Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Victims

	Name	Age	Village & contact details	District	State
1	Sampath, K. G.	45	Sandanakottai, Kanamangalam	Vellore	Tamil Nadu
2	Ali Asgar Khan	20	Dingapur village	West Midnapore	West Bengal
3	Ali Akbar Khan	23	Dingapur village	West Midnapore	West Bengal
4	Habib Khan	45	Dingapur village	West Midnapore	West Bengal
5	Asiar Khan	23	Dingapur village	West Midnapore	West Bengal
6	Sukur Ali Mallik	18	Phulberia village	West Midnapore	West Bengal
7	Shah Jahan Mallik	24	Phulberia village	West Midnapore	West Bengal
8	Qutubuddin Mallik	18	Phulberia village	West Midnapore	West Bengal
9	Agram Khan	23	Dingapur village	West Midnapore	West Bengal
10	Piar Khan	22	Dingapur village	West Midnapore	West Bengal

Appendix 2: List of Survivors

	Name	Age	Village	District	State
1	Ravi	45	Yet to be traced		
2	Palani	50	Yet to be traced		
3	Amirul Chaudhury	25	Dingapur village	West Midnapore	West Bengal

Appendix 3: Stakeholders met with in Chennai and Ranipet:

	Name	Organisation
1	Hassan (with five team members) ejazbinjabbar@yahoo.com	Tamilnadu Muslims Munnetra Kazhagam (TMMK)
2	Mr. S	West Bengal worker coordinating relief work at Ranipet
3	Kasinathan	District Secretary, CITU, Vellore
4	Arul Srinivasan	Secretary, CITU, Ambur

5	G. Latha	Ex-MLA, CPI-M, Member of CITU
6	Gajapati	Activist, CITU, Ambur
7	M.P Ramachandran	District President, CITU, Vellore
8	Babu	Secretary, CITU, Ranipet
9		Organisation to which RO process of the common effluent treatment plant (CETP) is contracted
10	Contractor-Foundry work	(The tank's foundry work was supposed to be contracted to him)
11	Three engineers	CETP
12	Security Person, IV Leathers	
13	Journalist and Activist (two persons)	
15	T S S Mani manitss.mani@gmail.com	District Secretary, People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Chennai
16	Dr. V.Suresh rightstn@yahoo.com	Advocate (Madras High Court) & General Secretary, PUCL - TN & Pondicherry
17	D. Nagasaila rightstn@yahoo.com	Advocate (Madras High Court) and Member, PUCL – TN & Pondicherry
18	Geeta Charusivam geetacsivam@gmail.com	Member, PUCL Kancheepuram and People's Forum, Kancheepuram
19	Magalakshmi magasubramanian@gmail.com	Advocate & Member, PUCL and People's Forum (Kancheepuram)
20	Vivekanandan kanchimakkalmandram@gmail.com	Member, People's Forum (Kancheepuram)
21	Iniyam mathuriniyan@gmail.com	District President, PUCL (Kancheepuram/ Vellore)
22	Staff/Members	Women's Collective, Muthukadaï, Ranipet
23	Shopkeepers	Shop next to SIPCOT Phase I, Ranipet
24	Shopkeepers	Fancy Store next to SIPCOT Phase I, Ranipet
25	Bakery owner	Bakery next to SIPCOT Phase I, Ranipet

26	Workers (17)	IV Leathers (Next to R.K. Leathers) and other semi-finished leather factories
27	Proprietor, India Studios and Hero Motors Dealer, Kannamangalam, North Arcot	
28	Relatives of Sampath (TN Victim)	Surveyor, Geological Survey of India, Sriperumbudur
29	Nagaraj	Deputy Superintendent of Police, Ranipet

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