

FIVE STEPS TO RECOVERY

Panchkarma, an *ayurvedic* treatment, holds the key to Bhopal gas victims' recovery

Richard Mahapatra - Bhopal

Famida, 40, a resident of Bhopal's Jayaprakash Nagar was "anything but dead" for 14-odd years after the disastrous methyl iso cyanate (MIC) gas leak in Bhopal in 1984. Two of her family members choked to death while running for their lives. She was left alive, but barely in a state to live a normal life. Blinding eye-burns and severe breathlessness, apart from the trauma of being forced to undergo an abortion, left her confined to her home.

Now, as she walks some 500 metres twice a week to an *ayurvedic* clinic administering treatment to the gas victims, she dreams of a life free of her illness. She was treated with *panchkarma* (literally, five steps), an *ayurvedic* treatment for flushing out toxic remains in her body, along with herbal oil massages. "It's a kind of second life they are giving me," she says, referring to Sambhavana Clinic-or the clinic of possibility.

Set up by a band of dedicated social workers in 1995, the clinic's sole objective is to provide treatment to the 120,000 critically affected MIC gas victims.

It is a perennial battle against frequent abortions, anxiety, depression, insomnia, irritability, tuberculosis, respiratory problems, genetic deformation for generations, and impotency for those exposed to the toxic trail let loose by the MIC plant.

The death toll is tentatively put at 16,000, but more die every year, says a Sambhavana Trust report. Official counting of the disaster-related deaths was stopped in 1992.

"It was a hope against hope," says Satinath Sarangi, founder member of the Sambhavana Trust which runs the clinic. Till today, both the Union Carbide Corporation and the Union government have not revealed the type of gases, which leaked on that day. The former because they consider it a "trade secret" and the latter for unknown reasons. Hence, treatment to the gas victims is provided only on the basis of symptoms.

"We didn't know about modern treatment, and time was running out," says Madhusudan Despande, an *ayurveda* doctor in the clinic. The search for traditional treatment for chronic toxic exposure was not easy, as a need for such treatment had not risen earlier.

It took almost two years for a team to zero in on the 5,000-years-old *Sushruta Samhita*, *Bhaishaj Ratnavali*, *Rasendra sar Sangraha* and other standard *ayurveda* texts. To begin with, the clinic provided treatment for ailments like breathlessness.

According to the clinic's annual report, from March 1997 to March 1998, 2,273 victims had registered with the clinic, and visited 15,399 times. Some 40 to 50 gas victims visit the clinic every day. "The recovery encouraged people to come back to us," says Sarangi, "but there were relapses of diseases because we could not find a total cure."

Finally, in 1997, at a national seminar on *ayurvedic* treatment of gas victims, experts were consulted to make the treatment sustainable. *Panchkarma* treatment, a process through which the toxic contents are flushed out of the body through urine, stool and vomiting, was suggested and approved.

Along with *panchakarma*, nutrient herbs are injected into the body for absorption of toxic contents, while artificial diarrhoea is caused to clean the stomach. Similarly, medicinal herb water is injected through the nose to reduce panic attacks and depressions, a common ailment among gas victims.

People visiting the clinic are free to choose between *ayurvedic* and allopathic treatment. However, as the illness is chronic among gas victims, both the treatments are clubbed together sometimes, though the *ayurvedic* treatment gets precedence. "It is very difficult to treat cardiovascular diseases *ayurvedic* treatment is preferred", says Dr Despande.

"After two years of treatment, I have started dreaming of a normal life," says Siddique, 40, who suffered from severe breathlessness and panic attacks frequently. "I am feeling well and can easily

walk to the clinic without help. Earlier, even a slight exertion left me breathless. The number of panic attacks have been reduced, too,” he says.

Thirty-year-old Sachin Ali and her son also get treated in Sambhavana Clinic. She was pregnant when the disaster struck. “I pumped in whatever resources I had in allopathic treatment but no avail,” she says. Both mother and son suffer from respiratory problems. “Within six month of treatment, I noticed a qualitative change in my health” she says.

To maintain quality and to cut costs, the herbal powder used in the treatment is produced in the clinic itself. Trained volunteers prepare 25 *ayurvedic* medicines with over 80 herbal ingredients gathered or purchased locally. Purchasing medicines externally is usually avoided. It is provided free of cost to the victims. Donations received by the clinic offsets costs. The clinic solicits individual donations through newspaper advertisements.

The three-year-old clinic seems to be attracting the attention of the gas victims. People working in the clinic say they have been getting new patients every day. “It has spread by word of evokes hope among the victims,” says Sarangi.

Every day, the clinic’s volunteers visit the affected areas around the MIC plant and refer the victims for different types of treatment offered by the clinic. The clinic maintains a database on patients, and each patient is monitored individually to assess the recovery. “Soon we will publish a report on the effectiveness of *ayurveda* and *yoga* for treating gas victims,” says Despande.

“It seems as if the people register at the clinic for a new life,” says Rashida Bi, another victim who had been visiting the clinic for the last two years. After more than 14 years of illness, seeking a new lease of life is not asking for too much.