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To the abyss, and back

Labonita Ghosh

Sunday, October 14, 2007 04:19 IST

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*Dyed roads and buildings, and a dying ecosystem. A visit to Vapi is like a trip to environmental hell, says **Labonita Ghosh***

What do you take when you visit a hazardous zone? Knowledge about the toxins you will encounter? Reserves of courage, knowing you'll inhale the foulest chemicals? A mask?

I packed a surgical mask for my trip to Vapi in Gujarat — the industrial hub that has recently been designated one of the most polluted place on the planet by US-based eco-watchdog, the Blacksmith Institute. It's just 190km from Mumbai, but almost a world away.

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As the photographer and I drove into Vapi at dawn, it looked like any other smog-encased town. But soon, signs of why Vapi made it to Blacksmith's 'Dirty Thirty' list began to show up. Visibility was low; we were unable to see even 200 feet ahead of us on the road.

Large portions of the highway were bright blue and red, permanently stained by a spillover from the nearby dyeing units. Whole four-storey buildings were stained green with dye — and then abandoned when they became unliveable. At the main Damanganga river, we noticed large pipes channelling a bright orange liquid into the reddish-brown water.

Every stream and water body along the way was red, sludgy and choked with refuse from the nearby factories of the Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation.

The trees have a thick film of fly ash and coal dust on them, turning the leaves a sickly yellow. As the smog lifted, we noticed factory chimneys stretching all the way into the horizon. Each of them was emitting a different coloured smoke— sulphur-yellow, reddish-orange, a wispy green. It would be pretty if it weren't dangerous.

By the time I left Vapi, it was almost midnight — about the time that the factories begin freely releasing their toxins and gases into the air. My eyes, which had started itching at sunset, were now burning. My throat was parched and my skin prickled. I had a slight headache.

This was what a visit to Chernobyl must feel like, I thought remembering accounts from the internet.

As we pulled onto the Ahmedabad highway, I was glad to be heading back to relatively less-polluted Mumbai.

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