

# Grassroots Movements by Minamata Disease Victims

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In 1956 it was noticed that many children in the fishing village of Minamata, south of Kumamoto Prefecture in Kyushu, were suffering from a serious central nervous disorder. Later this sickness came to be called Minamata-byo, or the Minamata Disease. This is Japan's most infamous example of a disease caused by industrial pollution. Moreover, the sickness has become known throughout the world as a prime example of the human and environmental costs that are unfortunately a byproduct of economic "development." In my talk I wish to show how the victims of this terrible disease, although initially reluctant, organized a vigorous legal and moral crusade to regain not only their rights, but also their humanity. My talk will be illustrated by a number of photographs.

Doctors at the Medical School at Kumamoto University first "discovered" the illness that would come to be called Minamata Disease in 1956. A report described the symptoms of a five-year old child that confirmed a disease characterized by the degeneration of nerve cells. Other cases followed. Men and women suddenly were struck with numbness of the limbs and disturbances in vision, movement, and speech. Some experienced uncontrollable shaking and as the disease progressed, control of all bodily functions failed. And sad as it may seem, when people's health is endangered by pollution-related disease, the weakest people in the area are the first to be affected. In the case of Minamata, embryos, infants, children, the elderly and the infirm and others physically weak were the first to be struck down by the disease. One victim contracted the disease at the age of 5 years and 10 months and died at the age of 23. For 18 years this person struggled to live.

As a medical researcher attached to Kumamoto University Medical School, I was among the first to witness the absolute terror of disease. It seemed so strange. The early victims of the disease were largely residents in small fishing villages. The people lived surrounded by the beauty and bounty of nature. They were poor but honest people and yet they were the first victims of a disease caused by the invasions of industry and capitalism. These people were by no means wealthy or powerful. They lived in peace, bothering no one. In other words, the victims were the weak members of society.

The girl in Photo 1 was struck by the disease at the age of 2 years and 11 months; she was the first "official" victim of the disease. Her sister came down with the disease at the age of five and died three years later, but she is still alive today, although



**Photo 1**

she has now long since lost the ability to speak or even to think. She requires complete life support. Both of her parents have died and now her elder sister is taking care of her. It is very difficult for her. Still, we all hope that she will continue to live for a long time. Even though she cannot speak, just being alive is important.

The Chisso Corporation (originally Nippon Chisso Hiryō), shown in Photo 2, was the culprit. It was a major chemical producing plant and in fact effluents from its acetaldehyde factory flowing into Minamata Bay were responsible for the mercury poisoning disease. At first, however, Chisso refused to admit any link with the growing number of Minamata residents suffering from nervous disorders. The disease was simply associated with the eating of fish. As researchers we knew that there was something in the fish that was the cause. Some knew that Chisso was the only chemical factory in the area that could possibly pollute the seas. Many people suspected that Chisso was the source of the problem, but there was no proof. Moreover, it was difficult to point the finger of guilt at the company that was so obviously a source of affluence and local pride. The medical school at Kumamoto University tried to determine the cause of the problem, but it was difficult to come up with an answer. At the beginning, the medical school at Kumamoto did not even know of the existence of the Chisso factory. This was only natural because it was outside of their specialization. At that time, the factory was not very forthcoming with information; indeed, it placed obstacles in the way of finding



**Photo 2:** The Chisso Corporation



**Photo 3:** The Shiranui Sea

out the cause of the problem.

By 1959, however, the proof was there. The blame was fixed on methyl mercury compounds, which had polluted the local fish population from drains coming directly out of Chisso's acetaldehyde-synthesizing plant in Minamata, pouring an estimated 600 tons of methyl mercury directly into the bay. According to what was later discovered, the sludge at the bottom on the bay contained approximately 10,000 ppm of methyl mercury.

The tranquil beauty of the Shiranui Sea is shown in Photo 3. It is an inland sea surrounded on four sides by islands. These waters used to be teeming with fish. The area supported the lives of about 200,000 people, primarily through fishing. The methyl mercury that was drained into the sea came to be concentrated in the fish and shellfish of the area. In this way, environmental pollution was able to enter into the food chain and cause poisoning. Around 1952, before the discovery of Minamata Disease, great quantities of fish were found floating on the surface of the water and sea gulls and other water fowl were seen falling out of the sky; on land cats went crazy and flung themselves into the ocean. Indeed the report was that there were no cats left in the area whatsoever.

The coast of the Shiranui Sea was dotted with small fishing villages. There was very little land for farming and people had to survive by eating fish. Therefore if one member in such a village fell victim to the Minamata Disease, it inevitably meant that nearly everyone in the village would be struck by the terrible disease. The disease was congenital. Methyl mercury ingested by pregnant women was able to penetrate the placenta and cause harm to the fetus. Babies were born with terrible birth defects and mental retardation. In the face of such an appalling and dreadful sufferings, what were



**Photo 4**

the victims of the Minamata disease to do? They could not go out fishing nor were they able to seek treatment. All they could do was hide indoors and if someone approached, they called out “stay away.” Early victims of the disease were shunned and many sought to hide family members stricken with the disease. The pride of these poor people is another reason why the scale of the new disease was slow to be known. Photo 4

is a picture of a child in a home belonging to one of the victims. The house was in terrible condition with the tatami and fusuma in shreds. It distressed me to see the poverty and suffering of these people. And as you can imagine, at first they were very reluctant to speak with outsiders.

In October, 1959, after the cause of the Minamata Disease was shown to be the Chisso factory, members of the Minamata Fishermen’s union demanded that Chisso close its drains. When the factory officials refused to negotiate the fishermen broke down the gate and entered the factory. Police were called and over 100 of the fishermen were arrested and found guilty of trespassing and destruction of property. At the time when people were dying and when increasing numbers of people were recognized as suffering from the Minamata Disease, the police took no action against the factory. In November some of the victims staged a sit-in at the main gate of the factory. However, no one, no political party or labor union, came to help them. They were completely isolated.

On December 30 the Governor of Kumamoto finally intervened and the factory agreed to give compensation but left the cause of the sickness vague. Of course the compensation was small, only 300,000 yen in the case of death and from 30,000 to 100,000 per year for other victims. Later it was discovered that the factory had carried out experiments and had itself determined that the methylmercury discharge was the cause of the disease.

People in the city of Minamata complained that the name Minamata Disease was causing problems for Minamata townspeople. They circulated a petition hoping to change the name of the disease, completely ignoring the feelings of the victims. Fishermen could no longer sell their fish and instead found themselves ostracized. Why were politicians, bureaucrats, townsmen, and the officials of Chisso unable to understand the problem from the point of view of the victims?

The Chisso factory was originally established in 1908. During the economic boom years during the First World War, Japan’s electronic and chemical industries grew rapidly. By the 1920s, the Chisso factory in Minamata was one of the largest industries in Kyushu. It brought population growth and new prosperity to the town of Minamata. Chisso workers entered into town government and soon a Chisso man was elected mayor of the town, and other Chisso-related men dominated the town assem-



**Photo 5:** Emperor Hirohito visiting the Chisso factory in 1932

bly. By the 1930s, Minamata was economic and politically under the control of the Chisso factory. It is symbolic that at the time of the outbreak of the Minamata Diseases in the 1950s that the mayor of Minamata was the former head of the Chisso factory.

In 1932, Emperor Hirohito visited the Chisso factory in Minamata. (Photo 5) The chemical industries not only produced fertilizers, but also the essential ingredients for explosives and other munitions. The emperor's visit is good evidence of the alliances struck between chemical industries such as Chisso and the military in the early Showa period. Chisso became a leading member of Japan's military-industrial complex. It set up factories in Korea and in North China and helped to pioneer Japanese attempts to "develop" industries on the Asian mainland. By the end of the 1930s, Chisso was the largest comprehensive factory operations in Asia. Land for factories was appropriated from the Koreans and Korean men and women were forced to work at the factory under Japanese supervision.

In the postwar period, Chisso had lost all its overseas assets and sought economic recovery by developing its Minamata factory. In a certain sense, their recovery plans were successful. However, in seeking recovery they placed primary importance on making profits. As a result, there were many instances of mistreatment of workers within the factory, and outside was the horrendous industrial pollution of the waters of Minamata Bay. During the war years, the government gave its support to big business in order to increase Japan's military strength; similarly, in the postwar period, the government encouraged economic growth and formed an alliance between the government and big business. As a result, the human rights of ordinary people came to be disregarded.

When news of the Minamata Disease was made public, only a few people came to the support of the victims. In January, 1968, the Minamata Disease Citizen's Assembly was born. This was stimulated by a lawsuit initiated by victims of the Niigata Minamata Disease in June of the previous year. Patients with symptoms similar to those of Minamata disease had appeared in a fishing and farming district of the city of Niigata on the estuary of the river Aganogawa in 1964–65. As in Minamata, mercury was found to be responsible, and again similar to Minamata, there was a plant nearby synthesizing acetaldehyd. The Kanose plant of Showa Denkō was found to have polluted the entire river basin. The Minamata Disease Citizen's Assembly sought to bring about an alliance between victims of mercury poisoning in Minamata and Niigata in pressing for legal redress.

On the one hand, in 1960 the Kumamoto University Medical School announced that there were no more outbreaks of the Minamata Disease. Doctors accepted this judgement and gradually the number of patients declined. Moreover, the national government set up a committee to examine reported cases of Minamata Disease and in the end, the decision regarding designation as an "official victim" of the disease was switched from medical specialists to the members of the committee. Moreover, the fact that many victims were the subjects of discrimination meant that many victims did not want to be identified as suffering from the dreaded disease. Even though they knew they were suffering from Minamata Disease, they hid the fact. This so-called age of silence continued for a long time.

Around 1968, one man, Kawamoto Teruo, whose father died of Minamata Disease, but was not officially recognized as a victim of the disease tried to clarify the real cause of his father's death. However, neither doctors nor the bureaucrats would listen to him. Thereupon, he began to make an inquiry into the many people who had died of Minamata Disease but who were not officially recognized as Minamata Disease victims. He was able to prove that there were many other people like his father. One typical example is a fish seller. After he fell ill he was hospitalized, but knowing that his shop could not sell fish if it were known that he was struck by Minamata Disease, he was taken back home by members of the Fishing Cooperative and died. Later, in an attempt to have this man's rights restored, Mr. Kawamoto and 17 others sought to have his case reviewed to show that he was a victim of the Minamata Disease.

On June 14, 1969 the Minamata Disease lawsuit was launched. It was a lawsuit that sought to clarify the responsibility of the Chisso Corporation and demand compensation for the victims of the disease. The lawsuit was brought forth by a few of the victims. It required a great deal of courage from them. But as a result, the Minamata Disease Citizen's Assembly, the people suffering from Minamata Disease, and the victims who were making the lawsuit were able to come together and gradually were able to increase their power. The Chisso labor union also issued a declaration that they "must reflect on their failure to support the victims" and came to support the victims of the disease. An association of scholars and researchers was formed to give support to the lawsuit. The news was picked up by the mass media and soon there



Photo 6: Sit-in Demonstration in front of the Chisso factory

were numerous support groups formed throughout the country. On the day of the trial the court was filled to overflowing by supporters who had traveled from all over the country.

As this trial was in progress, Mr. Kawamoto received news that a government committee had denied his request to be considered as an “official” Minamata Disease victim. He immediately appealed the result. Another medical examination was held and, in the end, the Environmental Protection Agency erased the earlier decision and officially recognized him as a victim of the Minamata Disease. After the official recognition of his disease, Mr. Kawamoto demanded to enter into direct negotiations with the Chisso Corporation. Initially refused, he began a sit-in demonstration in front of the Chisso Factory. (Photo 6) Since the factory was unable to reply to his questions without first getting word from the head office, on December 7, 1971, he began a sit-in in front of the Tokyo headquarters. His actions drew the attention of the media and he was able to attract many supporters to his cause. Even a group of bureaucrats within Kasumigaseki formed a support group.

On March 20, 1973, during the course of Mr. Kawamoto’s sit-in, the judgement of the Minamata lawsuit was announced. It ended in complete victory for the victims of the Minamata Disease. The victims who had won their case and their families came up to Tokyo and joined Mr. Kawamoto’s sit-in. A struggle resulted and many people were arrested. Finally, on July 9, 1973, the sit-in came to an end when both sides signed a memo of agreement. Thereafter there were a series of additional lawsuits against the Chisso Corporation taking place in Fukuoka, Kyoto, Osaka and Tokyo; in the end the number of plaintiffs exceeded 2000. This was because the narrow definition of the Minamata Disease had limited the number of officially recognized vic-

tims to just over 10,000 persons. However, all of these lawsuits, with the exception of the Kansai judgment on May, 1996, resulted in arbitration in which the plaintiffs accepted offers made by the government. It would seem then that the Minamata Disease incident had come to an end. However, the victims of the disease have become worse and worse as they aged and they were afraid that people would forget the awful lessons that were learned in Minamata.

Minamata victims wanted to make sure that the lessons of their struggle have been remembered. The first lesson learned from the Minamata Disease is that the weak are the first victims of environmental pollution. Second, environmental pollution occurs in places where there is social discrimination. Third, we have learned that in case of absolute distress it is necessary for a few strong-willed people to stand up. If people stand up, change can be brought about. Finally, we have learned the necessity to cultivate strong people who will not give in meekly to authority.

The lawsuits were an exhausting experience. Nonetheless, as a result many people came to know the real issues connected with the Minamata Disease. Even now we are in the process of finding out new information. For example, the harsh questioning of the victims during the course of the trials has brought to light details of the disease that have proven beneficial to a medical understanding of the disease.

The study of environmental problems requires abandoning any walls between amateurs and specialists and a totally open approach to scholarship. Perhaps it was unavoidable at the beginning, but it was unfortunate for social and political problems of this sort to be confined within the narrow realm of medicine. It makes me feel dispirited when I reflect on the total lack of social concern that existed at the beginning. It is so important to understand the position of the weak and to have a strong goal to preserve the integrity of life. In order to advance scholarship along these lines it is necessary, as was the case in Minamata, for a grassroots movement to make specialists listen to their cause of the people.

Finally is the message contained in the Minamata photographs taken by the world-famous photographer, Eugene Smith\*. The picture is of Tomoko in her mother's arms. The mother's words are instructive: "This child has absorbed all the mercury that I ate. As a result, her six brothers and sisters who were born after her have been able to be free of the Minamata Disease. Our family is indebted to this child. Seeing this child, the brothers and sisters do everything by themselves and help each other out. They have grown up to be wonderful children. It has all been due to this child. Moreover, through this photograph people throughout the world can know the fear of environmental problems. This child, named Tomoko, is our treasure which we have received from God." Tomoko was 22 years old when she died. While she was alive, she was unable to speak even one word. How can we calculate the value of her brief life? From her we learn above all else the need to value the great gift of life that has

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\* Please see *Minamata*, words and photos by W. Eugene Smith and Aileen M. Smith, (New York, Holt Rinehart and Winston) 1975, for a copy of the picture of Tomoko.

been given to us.

This is a translation of an illustrated talk given by Dr. Harada Masazumi, Professor of Medical Sciences, at Kumamoto Gakuen University. The talk originally included over 20 slide illustrations. Here only 6 illustrations are given. For more details about the Minamata Disease, please see Norrie Huddle and Michael Reich, *Island of Dreams: Environmental Crisis in Japan*, Autumn Press, reprint 1987 and Akio Mishima, *Bitter Sea: The Human of Minamata Disease*, Kōsei Pub. Co., 1992. For more in English by Dr. Harada, see his “Minamata Disease and the Mercury Poisoning of the Globe,” on his website: <http://www.einap.org/envdis/Minamata.html>. In Japanese, see for example, Harada Masazumi, *Minamatabyō* (Iwanami Shoten, 1972), *Minamata wa owatteinai* (Iwanami Shoten, 1985), *Ima Minamatawa* (Iwanami Shoten, 1983); Miyamoto Kenichi (ed.), *Kōza Chiiki Kaihatsu to jichitai 2* (Chikuma Shobō, 1977); Ishimure Michiko, *Kukai jōdo: Waga Minamata byō*, (Kōdansha, 1969); W. Engene Smith and Aileen M. Smith *Minamata Shashinshū* (Sanichishobō, 1982)