Bhopal Lives

By Suketu Mehta

The Village Voice

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The 1984 Union Carbide Toxic-Gas Disaster Killed 10,000 People — and Has Changed Everything for Its Survivors

Next Tuesday, December 3, the International Medical Commission-Bhopal (IMCB) will release its final report on the current medical, social, and economic status of the Union Carbide disaster, a leak of toxic gas that claimed around 10,000 lives in Bhopal, India, 12 years ago.

The report, the culmination of a three-year study by a group of doctors affiliated with prestigious institutions in the U.S., Europe, and Asia, is the first comprehensive, peer-reviewed study of the chronic effects of the disaster that has been released publicly.

The commission found that up to 50,000 survivors are suffering from partial or total permanent disability as a consequence of the gas disaster. In addition the widely recognized lung and eye injuries, its report details medical conditions that have never been identified before, such as neurotoxicological effects (damage to the brain and central nervous system). They affect short-term memory, balance, and motor skills – they affect the survivors' ability to hold jobs, and their children's ability to read and write.

The study documents, for the first time, post-traumatic stress syndrome in the survivors. "People were buried alive," says Dr. Rosalie Bertell, one of the commissioners. "Some of them actually were in a pile of bodies to be bu4rned and came to—you can imagine the nightmares and panic attacks after that."

According to earlier studies done by the Indian Council of Medical Research, descendants up to the third generation of survivors may sustain genetic damage leading to cancer and abnormalities in offspring. The new findings were not available to the Supreme Court of India when it imposed a settlement for damages in 1989, which the commission found to be "decidedly inadequate." The report, therefore, should provide new grounds to reopen the case.

Bhopal has joined the roster of internationally recognized symbol-places–along with Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and Chernobyl–whose very names have become synonymous with the tragedies that have taken place within their precincts. Mention the word *Bhopal* to a person outside India, and they won't think of a graceful city on the hills above two lakes with some of the most glorious Muslim architecture in India. They will

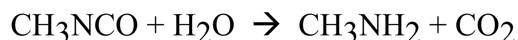
think about what happened the night of December 2 and the early morning of December 3, 1984, when an accident at the chemical plant owned by Union Carbide of Danbury, Connecticut, led to history's worst industrial disaster.

There is a pornography of images of disaster in the Third World – famine, floods, war, and earthquakes. Quick television interviews with the victims reinforce those images. And, as with all pornographic the net effect is this: the affected people lose their individuality, their humanity, and we, the viewers, who have no idea about their lives, begin to distance ourselves from them. As it is, they all look so foreign to us: all these brown or black people, poor things. A lot has been written about the bare facts of Bhopal disaster: how it might have happened, how many died, how many were injured. This article, the first of two parts, examines what has rarely been portrayed: the complexity of people's individual responses to an enduring disaster.

The Night of the Gas

In May 1982, a Union Carbide inspection team from the Danbury headquarters visited the Bhopal plant and found 61 safety and maintenance problems, 30 of them major. A series of gas leaks had already resulted in the death of one factory worker and injuries to several others. Five months before the night of the accident, vital refrigeration and cooling systems had been shut down. Around the same time, the maintenance crew was reduced from six to two workers as part of a cost-cutting drive. Local lawyers and journalists had been warning Union Carbide for months that the plant could be dangerous to its neighbors. The company responded that such fears were "absolutely baseless."

In the early morning hours of December 3, 1984, water entered under still disputed circumstance an underground storage tank containing 90,000 pounds of methyl isocyanate, a highly toxic chemical used to make pesticides. This set off the following reaction:



$$CH_3NCO + H_2O \rightarrow CH_3NH_2 + CO_2$$

Forty-one tons of methyl isocyanate along with a stew of other highly toxic gases possibly including hydrogen cyanide boiled over and burst through the tank at a temperature of over 200 degrees Celsius and a rate of over 40,000 pound an hour. This was the birth of what scientists later name "Bhopal Toxic Gas." The gas rose from the plant, then sedately, unhurriedly, floated out over the sleeping city.

Bhopalis have very personal relationships with "the gas." Accounts of that night – again when in Bhopal someone says "that night," they mean the night of December 2-3, 1984 – describe how the gas was going toward Jahangirabad or Hamidia Road; how it hovered a few feet above the ground at some places or how it hugged the wet farm earth in others; how it killed buffalo and pigs but spared chickens and mosquitoes; how it made all the leaves of a peepul tree turn black and how it had a particular hunger for the tulsi plant; how it would travel down one side of a road but not the other, like rain falling a few feet from you while you're standing in the sunshine. People know the gas like a member of their family – they know its smell, its color, its favorite foods, it predilections. One thing everybody remembers is the smell of chilies burning. Chilies are normally burned to ward off the evil eye, when, for example, a child is sick. People woke up and thought it must be a powerful evil eye that's being driven away, the stink is so strong.

As people ran with their families, they saw their children falling beside them, and often had to choose which ones they would carry on their shoulders and save. This image comes up again and again in the dreams of the survivors: in the stampede, the sight of a hundred people walking over the body of their child.

Iftekhar Begum went out on the morning after the gas to help bury the Muslim dead. There were so many that she could not see the ground—she had to stand on the corpses to wash them. As she stood on the bodies, she noticed that many of the dead women had flowers in their hair. The gas had come on a Sunday, a night when people had dressed up to go out to a film or to someone's house for dinner. The women had, as is common all over India, braided their hair with jasmine or mogra—small, fragrant flowers.

When Iftekhar Begum came back from the graveyard, all her fingertips were bleeding, she had sewn so man shrouds.

Arun's Story

What would you do if you woke up one night when you were 13 years old and by the morning, seven of the 10 members of your immediate family were dead? How would your life change?

When I first meet the young man I will call Arun, to whom this happened, he is busy writing a wedding invitation card. Not his own. Not anybody's, in fact; there will only be one copy of this invitation, and it will be show to the judge in the gas victims' claims court. There is a Muslim woman with him. She has allotted 50,000 rupees ($1249) in compensation for her injuries which the government has kept in a fixed-deposit bank account to prevent her from spending it all at once. To withdraw funds from her account, she has to demonstrate to the judge that she has some compelling need, like the wedding of a daughter. Arun is wise to the inscrutable ways of the authorities; for a consideration, he will help her get her money out. So he sits next to me making us this invitation to a wedding that will never be.

Arun's fee for writing up the affidavit and printing up one copy of the ceding card at a printing press (such costs him 100 rupees, or $3) is 3000 rupees ($86). This, he points out, is less than what a lawyer would charge, which is 10 percent, 5000 rupees ($143). "The lawyers hate me," he crows.

The gas victim Arun loves his life. He wakes up at noon, massages himself with mustard oil, and spends the afternoon sitting on the newly constructed balcony of his house, chatting with friends. In the evenings, he drinks or goes to the Hotel International and asks to see the "special menu," which consists of several pages of pictures of the women they have for sale upstairs. On an occasional Sunday, he'll get partridges, which he kills with his own hands, cooks, and shares with his friends, who seem to be in awe of him. Three or four times a month he goes to the claims courts on behalf of someone, and that's enough money for him, mostly.

Arun first learned of the deaths of his parents and five siblings when he saw their photos stuck up on the wall by the side of the road. Till then people would tell him but he didn't believe them. Looking at the pictures the government had put up to alert survivors,

Arun did not cry. Arun claims he has never once cried. "There were so many corpses. Who will you cry over? After a while, the heart becomes quiet."

On the night of the gas, Arun fell I in love. As Arun and his family ran, as one by one his parents, brothers, sisters dropped to the ground or got separated from him, Arun felt someone holding his hand and leading him. On they ran, through the chaotic streets. That was the beginning of Arun's first love. The girl holding his hand lived in his neighborhood, and later on, she fed him and took care of him.

That girl was the first of his neighbors to adopt Arun and take care of him, but she was by no means the last. There were other families in the slum, his extended family in Lucknow, a rickshaw driver and his wife, and finally, the activist Satinath Sarangi, known with much love as "Sathyu" among the survivors. Arun moved into Sathyu's house and became a poster child of the activist movement; his story was widely used and he was recruited by all manner of groups, including the youth wing of the Communist Party of India, the state's major political parties, and almost all of the activist groups working on Bhopal. Arun became a kind of traveling victim, going on tours to talk about the tragedy that had devastated his family, not only all over India, but also, twice, to the United States. He was a natural. "At the age of 15 I learned to give such good answers that the journalists loved me," he recalls gleefully. On one of his trips to the U.S., Arun and a couple of the other survivors, while attempting to distribute literature in the Houston hotel where the annual meeting of Carbide's shareholders was being held, were arrested by the police and spent 10 hours in jail. Arun was impressed by the fact that the American jail was air-conditioned.

But gradually, Arun went from being a victim to something of a predator. Sundry scam inevitably pop up in any community where a large amount of money enters the scene all at once, and Arun has learned how to profit from them. So, for a commission, using an efficient system of bribes paid to every one from clerks to judges, Arun will extract the gas victims' compensation money from the clutches of the government. He is also a loan shark; he advances money at exorbitant rates of interest to illiterate migrants from the countryside, actively assists them in speeding it in the Bhopal bars, and beats them soundly if they cannot pay him. He has a gang, which will assault people's enemies for a price. He points to my knee—300 rupees ($9) for breaking that—and then to my arm—460 rupees ($10) for that.

Once, when Sathyu was remonstrating with Arun about his misdeeds, Arun responded, "Look at Warren Anderson [then Union Carbide's chairman]. He got away with killing so many people. If he can get away, so can I." Besides, Arun sometimes puts his potential for violence to good use. Tough he is Hindu, he put his life on the line during the bloody Hindu-Muslim riots of 1992, when he stood guard outside Muslim homes with a sword.

Every year, on the anniversary of the gas leak, the chief minister holds a big commemorative public meeting and invites a number of victims. Arun will go this year and ask him for a favor—a coveted license to sell kerosene, which he'll divert to the black market. The chief minister, he tells me with a laugh, will never refuse such a famous orphan anything when there are so many journalists present.

Arun Hates the term "gas victim." Once, in 1987, when he and other survivors were traveling to a demonstration, the train stopped at a station and the loudspeakers boomed out: "Now, all the gas victim children from Bhopal, go an play in the special

waiting room." Arun sought out the government officer responsible for the announcement and swore: "Your mother's cunt."

"Is it stamped on my forehead, 'gas victim'?" he asks me. "Should I beg for pity, Hai Allah, help me, give me some food, I'm a gas victim?" Arun instructs his kid brother: "If a man thinks himself to be weak, he *will* be weak." Accordingly he insists the 12-year-old boy get up at six every morning to do calisthenics. There is a reason, Arun believes, that he himself has remained strong. "Gas? I shit gas out of my ass. You drink enough, you smoke enough, and there won't be any gas." To prove that he is stronger than anybody, gas-affected or not, Arun steps in front of a passing minibus and looks at me. "Shall I beat up the driver?" he asks.

But Arun also tells me, matter-of-factly, that he's been having *gabrahat*. This is a condition that is commonly reported by survivors, and there's no exact English translation. All of a sudden, Arun's heart will beat wildly, he'll start sweating, and his mind will flood with anxiety. This lasts for about 10 minutes. Since most of the people affected by the gas lived in the poorer part of Bhopal, they were, by and large, not deemed worthy of psychiatric treatment or counseling. It's certainly not anything the government will give Arun, or anyone, compensation for.

One night, three of us—Arun, his sidekick Ramdayal, and I—sit in the gas victims' beer bar, a shed off the housing colony. Around us are gas victims, all of them men, drinking with the compensation money they should be spending to get treatment for their wives, education for their kids. As the evening progresses, Arun and Ramdayal are getting a lot more drunk than I am because they are drinking whiskey-and-beer cocktails. Presently, they get into theological argument: Was God present the night of the gas?

On the night of the gas, as his family was dying, as he was falling in love, Arun lost his faith in God. "Mother's prick, six, seven people died—where the fuck was Ganesh? If I met him, I'd beat him with shoes and chase him off, mother's prick, sister's prick. The gas came, Ganesh fucked my mother, then ran away. If my mother were here I wouldn't have a history." I've never seen him so angry; he's almost shouting, and finally he becomes completely incoherent and the gaps between the obscenities vanish and it's all just obscenities: mother's prick, sister's prick. When he calms down, he says, "Only work is karma, work is the fruit." Later I realize what he's just said, in a single sentence: Krishna's teaching to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita.

The Lifting of the Veils

In the years after the poison cloud came down from the factory, the veils covering the faces of the Muslim women of Bhopal started coming off.

The Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (the Bhopal Gas-Affected Women Workers' Organization), or GBPMUS, is the most remarkable and, after all these years, the most sustained movement to have sprung up in response to the disaster. The BGPMUS grew out of a group of sewing centers formed after the events to give poor women affected by the gas a means of livelihood. As they came together into the organization, the women participated in hundreds of demonstrations, hurried attorneys to fight the case against Carbide as well as the Indian government, and linked dup with activist movements all over India and the world.

On any Saturday in Bhopal, you can go to the Park opposite Lady Hospital and sit among an audience of several hundred women and watch all your stereotypes about traditional Indian women get shattered. I listened as a grand monster in her sixties got up and hurled abuse at the government with a vigor that Newt Gingrich would envy. She was followed by a woman in a plain sari who spoke for an hour about the role of multinationals in the third world, the wasteful expenditure of the government on sports stadiums, and the rampant corruption to be found everywhere in the country.

As the women of Bhopal got politicized after the gas, they became aware of other inequities in their lives too. Slowly, the Muslim women of the BGPMUS started coming out of the veil. They explained this to others and themselves by saying: look, we have to travel so much, give speeches, and this burkha, this long black curtain, is hot and makes our health worse.

But this was not a sudden process; great care was paid to social sensitivities. When Amida Bi waned to give up her burkha, she asked her husband. "My husband took permission from his older brother and my parents." Assent having been give all around, Amida Bi now goes all over the country without her veil, secure in the full support of her extended family.

Her daughters however, are another matter. Having been married out to other families, they still wear the burkha. But Amida Bi refuses to allow her own two daughters-in-law, over whom she has authority, to wear the veil at all. "I don't think the burkha is bad," she says. "But you can also do shameful things while wearing a burkha."

Half of the Muslim women still attuning the rallies have flooded up their burkhas forever.

Sajida Bano's Story

Sajida Bano never had to use a veil until her husband died. He was the first victim of the Carbide plant. In 1981, three years before the night of the gas, Ashraf was working in the factory when a valve malfunctioned and he was splashed with liquid phosgene. He was dead within 72 yours. After that, Sajida was forced to move with her two infant sons to a bad neighborhood, where if she went out without the burkha she was harassed. When she put it on, she felt shapeless, faceless, and anonymous: she could be anyone's mother, anyone's sister.

In 1984, Sajida took a trip to her mother's hour in Kanpur, and happened to come back to Bhopal on the night of the gas. Her four-year-old son died in the waiting room of the train station, while his little brother held on to him. Sajida had passed out while looking for a taxi outside. The factory had killed the second of the three people Sajida loved most. She is left with her surviving son, now 14, who is sick in body and mind. For a long time, whenever he heard a train whistle, he would run outside, thinking that his brother was on that tr4ain.

Sajida Bano asked if I would carry a letter for her to "those Carbide people," whoever they are. She wrote it all in one night, without revision. She wants to eliminate distance, the food chain of activists, journalists, lawyers, and governments between her and the people in Danbury. Her, with her permission, are excerpts that I translated:

Sir,

Big people like you have snatched the peace and happiness of us poor people. You are living it up in big palaces and mansions. Moving around in cars. Have you ever thought that you have wiped away the marriage marks from our foreheads, emptied our laps of children, bathed us in poison, and we are sobbing, but death doesn't come. Like a living, walking corpse you have left us. At least tell us what our crime was, for which such a big punishment has been given. If with the strength of your money you had shot us all at once with bullets, then we wouldn't have to die such miserable sobbing deaths.

You put your hand on your heart and think, if you are a human being: if this happened to you, how would your wife and children feel? Only this one sentence must have caused you pain.

If this vampire Union Carbide factory would be quiet after eating my husband, if heartless people like you would have your eyes opened, then probably I would not have lost my child after the death of my husband. After my husband's death my son would have been my support. But before he would grow you uprooted him. I don't know myself why you have this enmity against me.

Why have you played with my life so much? What was I, a poor helpless woman, spoiling of yours that even after taking my husband you weren't content. You ate my child too. If you are a human being and have a human heart then tell me yourself what should be done with you people and with me. I am asking you only, tell me, what should I do?

Negative-Positive

The gas changed people's lives in ways big and small. Harishankar Magician used to be in the negative-positive business. It was a good business. He would sit on the pavement; hold up a small glass vial, and shout, "Negative to positive!" Then, hollering all the while, he would demonstrate. "It's very easy to put negative on paper. Take this chemical, take any negative, put it on any paper, rub it with this chemical, then put it in the sun for only 10 minutes. This is a process to make a positive from a negative." By this time a crowd would have gathered to watch the miraculous transformation of a plain film negative into an image on a postcard. In an hour and a half, Harishankar Magician could easily earn 50, 60 rupees ($2) in this business. Then the gas came.

It killed his son and destroyed his lungs and his left leg. In the negative-positive business, he had to sit for hours. He couldn't do that now with his game leg, and he couldn't shout with his withered lungs. So Harishankar Magician looked for another business that didn't require standing and shouting. Now he wanders the city, pushing a bicycle that bears a box with a hand-painted sign: "ASTROLOGY BY ELECTRONICE MINI COMPUTER MACHIN."

Passersby, seeing the mysterious box, gather spontaneously to ask what it is. He invites them to put on the stethoscope, which is a pair of big padded headphones attached to the Machin. Then the front panel of the Machin comes alive with flashing Disco Lights, rows of red and yellow and green colored bulbs. The Machin, Harishankar

Magician tells his customers, monitors their blood pressure, and then tells their fortune through the stethoscope. The fee is two rupees (six cents). Harishankar doesn't like this business; with this, unlike his previous trade, he thinks he is peddling a fraud. Besides, he can only do it for an hour and a half a day, and clears only about 15 rupees (43 cents).

Harishankar Magician is sad. He yearns for the negative-positive business. Once the activist Sathyu took a picture of Harishankar's son, who was born six days before the gas came. He died three years later. Harishankar and his wife have no photographs of their dead boy in their possession, and they ask Sathyu if he can find the negative of the photo he took. Then they will use the small vial of chemical to make a positive of their boy's negative, with only 10 minutes of sunlight.

The Plague of the Lawyers

Almost immediately after the disaster, the American lawyers started coming, by the dozens. Out they stepped from the plane, blinking and squinting in the strong Bhopal light, covering their noses with handkerchiefs as they stepped gingerly through the dung-strewn lanes of the slums, glad-handing the bereaved, pointing to their papers and telling their translators to tell the victims "MILLIONS of rupees, you understand? MILLIONS!" And so the people signed, putting their names down in Hindi, or just with their thumbprints.

In the Oriya slum, 11 years later, word spreads that a visitor form America has come, and a cluster of people come to meet me. A young man, Bhimraj, and his mother, Rukmini, approach me hesitantly, holding out a carefully preserved piece of paper. "The American government gave us this," he says. "Can you tell me what it says?"

I look at the document. It is a legal contract.

"Contract between law office of Pat Maloney, PC, of the city of San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas, and Suresh.

"Client agrees to pay attorney as attorney's fee for such representation one third (33%) of any gross recovery before action is filed, forty percent (40%) of any gross recover after action is filed but before the commencement of trial, and fifty percent (50%) of any gross recover after commencement of trial.

"This contract is performable in Bexar County, Texas."

On the night of the gas, Rukmini abandoned her three-year-old son, Raju, who was dead, and ran with her five-year-old daughter, Rajini, who died three days later. When the layers came, they got Rukmini's husband, Suresh, to put his name down in Hindi on this document. They took the family's pictures. "They didn't even send us a copy," says Rukmini. That was the last the family heard from the man they believed came on behalf of "the American government." So now they ask me, what should they do with this paper that they've been holding on to for 11years?

"Tear it up and throw it away," I tell them. "It's junk." They look at me, their faces blank, not understanding.

(When I returned to America, I tried to contact attorney Pat Maloney. He did not return phone calls.)

Responding to such abuses, the Indian parliament passed a law declaring itself the sole legal representative of all the Bhopal gas victims. It sued Carbide in federal court in

New York. The court held that the proper venue for the case should be in India; spectators were treated to the uniquely edifying spectacle of hearing the Indian government's lawyers argue the inadequacy of its own legal system, countering Carbide's lavish testaments to the excellence of the very same system. The reason was simple: everybody knew that any potential damage award given out by an Indian court would be considerably smaller than one awarded by a U.S. court. Had the victims succeeded in suing the company in its home country and winning, they would probably have bankrupted the giant corporation, much as the asbestos liability cases bankrupted the Manville Corporation and breast-implant litigation bankrupted Dow Corning.

As it transpired, after prolonged legal wrangling, the Indian Supreme Court unilaterally, without giving the victims a chance to make their case, imposed a settlement to the amount of $470 million, with the government to make up any shortfall. The government had asked for $3 billion from Carbide. Carbide executives were delighted; they speedily transferred money to the government. That was in 1989. The first victim did not see the first rupee of Carbide's money until Christmas of 1992, eight years after the night of the gas. A total of 597,000 claims for compensation have been filed. As of May 1996, the government has passed rulings on only about half of them – 302,422 – and awarded compensation for injuries to 288,000 Bhopalis. Out of the total settlement amount of $470 million plus interest since 1989, the government had, by May of 1996, only disbursed some $241 million.

The Quantification of Loss

A government psychiatrist who has done a close study of the minds of the gas victims has come to this conclusion: they don't want to work. "You can't get domestic help in Bhopal nowadays," the doctor complained to me. "If a family has five affected people who get 200 rupees ($6) each [in interim relief], that's a thousand rupees a month, so they don't want to work."

There is a widespread belief that the people destroyed by the gas – who tended to come from the poorer sections of Bhopal – aren't receiving deserved compensation for grievous injuries that they are legally and morally entitled to, but some sort of unearned windfall that's made them indolent. This belief is prevalent among the rich in Bhopal, government officials, and Carbide executives.

J.L. Ajmani is the secretary of the gas relief department of Madhya Pradesh state, and he won't give mean interview. Armani is a man of the 21st century. In his luxurious office, he has a computer, a bank of three phones, a sofa, a huge desk, and an executive chair in which he reposes under a big picture of Mahatma Gandhi. While brushing me off, he keeps tapping into his digital diary. I ask him about allegations of corruption in his department. He laughs fearlessly. "It's been 11 years. Volumes have been written. You also write."

Although the government isn't releasing figures about the average amount of rewards, the welfare commissioner's office told me that the maximum compensation awarded for deaths is 150,000 rupees ($4286), except in a small handful of cases. Mohammed Laique, a local lawyer who has been representing claimants from the beginning, gave me the standard rates of compensation. For most deaths, the amount

awarded is 100,000 rupees ($2857). For personal injury cases, 90 percent get 25,000 rupees, or $714 (the award bestowed on most of the survivors I spoke to directly).

Of these amounts, says Laique, “claimants lose between 15 percent and 20 percent at the outset in bribes. To get money out early, you pay another 10 percent.” Then there are sundry small bribes. Clerks in government offices demand anywhere from 100 to 2000 rupees ($57) to move papers, depending on the size of the awards. The payments the government has been disbursing since 1990 for interim relief (200 rupees, or $6 a month) are also deducted from the awards. This means that from an award of 25,000 rupees, the maimed survivor in September 1995 could expect to receive as little as 7600 rupees. Two hundred and seventeen dollars.

Union Carbide claims that the compensation is “more than generous by any Indian standard.” Is it really? For comparison, Laique pulls out the schedule of standard compensation set by Indian Railways for railway accidents. The schedule is gruesomely specific:

> In case of death: 200,000 minimum ($5714)
> For disability of 1 leg: 120,000 ($3429)
> If one or two hands are cut off: 200,000
> If one or two legs are severed: 200,000
> Thumb cut off: 60,000 ($1714)
> If four fingers cut off from one hand: 100,000 ($2857)
> 3 fingers cut off: 60,000
> 2 or 1 fingers cut off: 40,000 ($1143)
> Breast cut off: 180,000 ($5143)
> For problem with 1 eye: 80,000 ($2286)
> Hip joint fracture: 40,000
> Minimum for bodily injury: 40,000

“And the railways give very fast decisions, plus interest after three months,” adds Laique. During the bloody communal rioting that followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, the government gave a minimum of 200,000 rupees ($5714) to the families of each person killed; these were people of the same socioeconomic status as Carbide's victims. It's clear that, if a Bhopali had any choice in the instrument of his death, it would be financially much more advantageous to be killed or maimed in a train wreck or at the hands of a religious fanatic than through an American multinational's gas cloud.

To be continued in the next issue.

After Bhopal

By Suketu Mehta

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THIS ARTICLE IS THE SECOND OF TWO PARTS;
PART ONE APPEARED LAST WEEK.

On the day after a Union Carbide plant leaked a toxic gas that would kill 10,000 people in Bhopal, India, Warren Anderson, Carbide's chairman at the time, flew to Bhopal to see the situation for himself and offer aid. The chairman was propelled by a visceral, human impulse, and acted against the advice of his lawyers and public relations people; he was promptly arrested, detained for several hours, and put on a plane to New Delhi. He was granted bail and flew home a few days later.

When he returned to Connecticut, Anderson met his real enemies — reporters, lawyers, shareholders, and consultants, hounding him with questions, offering advice. He fled with his wife and his mother-in-law and holed up for a week in a Stamford hotel, having all their meals sent up, "a grown man hiding in a hotel room," as he later put it. After the accident, he had trouble sleeping. And well he might. Anderson is now wanted on charges of culpable homicide in India, and is rumored to be living quietly in Vero Beach, Florida.

Anderson's 1984 Bhopal expedition marked the last time a senior Carbide executive from Danbury got his shoes soiled in the city.

In the years after the tragedy, Carbide has admitted "moral responsibility" for the disaster. The company proposed a variety of small projects to aid the victims, including setting up a vocational center and contributing $2 million toward relief efforts. After the assets of its Indian subsidiary were seized by Indian courts, Carbide made a virtue out of necessity and, at the Supreme Court's direction, announced that it would use the frozen assets to set up a trust to build a new hospital for the survivors. The company refuses to use any of its unencumbered assets toward this laudable endeavor.

Throughout, it has stoutly maintained that the disaster was a result of deliberate sabotage. The Carbide hypothesis goes like this: a disgruntled employee, upset about being demoted, deliberately introduced water into the methyl isocyanate tank, setting off the deadly chemical reaction. Subsequently,

all the employees and supervisors on duty at the plant at that time decided, for reasons best known to them, to engage in a massive cover up of the real causes of the accident, and have successfully maintained their conspiracy through the 11 ½ years since.

“Much of the world’s safety engineering community doubts the veracity of Carbide’s sabotage evidence,” writes Wil Lepkowski, the American reporter who has most closely followed Bhopal, in *Chemical and Engineering News*. That evidence, Lepkowski points out, has never been subjected to scientific peer review or presented in court. Carbide will not name the saboteur, even though it promised to do so in court “at the appropriate time.” That was in 1986; a decade later, an appropriate time has still not been found.

At the moment, there is no Carbide employee in Bhopal. There is no executive, no secretary, no engineer personally supervising the setting up of their hospital; nobody walking through the slums to make sure that the people they visited their holocaust upon are being adequately taken care of.

Carbide is doing nothing to monitor the settlement amounts, to ensure that the victims’ financial needs are being taken care of; its labs are doing no research, nor is the company funding any, on the long term effects of methyl isocyanate; and there is no monument in Danbury or at any other company site to the gas victims of Bhopal. As Carbide’s chief of public relations Bob Berzok put it to me when refusing my request to talk to anyone but himself at the company, anyone at all from the president down to a cafeteria worker, “This does go back 10 years and I’m not interested in disrupting the business going on here. I inquired of several people and the feeling in general for those who were here 10 years ago was that there really was no interest in discussing their personal feelings [about Bhopal].”

Berzok himself has been to India some 15 times in connection with the Bhopal disaster, not to help the victims but to help the Indian subsidiary better manage its public relations. Staying at the posh guest house that Carbide used to own in Shamla Hills, Berzok has never once visited the slum colonies where the victims live and die; and he doesn’t recall a single name or a single distinguishing feature of any of the victims. He saw some of them in the medical stations set up in the old city. “There were some people that were having difficulties breathing,” is what he remembers.

For Union Carbide, Bhopal was a hit and run accident.

“I wanted him to apologize,” says Syed Mohammed Irfan about Warren Anderson. Irfan lost his sister and his health because of the Carbide factory. Since the accident, his wife is terrified of living in Bhopal and has left him to live elsewhere in the state. I wanted him to apologize, be humble. Say we made a mistake; get treatment, we’ll pay for it. We wouldn’t have hung him. This didn’t happen. Carbide may have accepted “moral responsibility” for the disaster, but has never apologized to the people of Bhopal.

So Irfan’s views have changed. “Now if I meet Anderson in the street I’ll kill him.”

I have also met people who don’t think Carbide is to blame. A high school teacher who lost her niece, and has seen her own health suffer, told me, “I feel no anger toward Carbide. It’s the fault of the technology.” All of Bhopal is not a vengeful mob thirsting for revenge. Berzok emphasizes that whenever he was in Bhopal, traveling openly as a Carbide employee from the U.S., “I was treated very graciously, very hospitably, and that was true of all my visits over the years.”

Maybe if the victims saw their enemy in person, could put a human face on him, witnessed his genuine anguish and his tears, there could be some hope of forgiveness, or even of reconciliation. But as it is, the dehumanized structure of the multinational corporation works both ways; it makes it easier for individual officers of the corporation to avoid personal liability, and it makes it easier for outsiders to hate an abstract entity, a faceless monolith. Images of Anderson are drawn all over walls in Bhopal; they depict a stick figure with a top hat below the slogans “Hang Anderson” or “Killer Carbide.”

An activist, Satinath Sarangi, once gave the children of the survivors in the slum where he lives pens and paper, and asked them to draw pictures of Anderson. I saw the children’s drawings; most of them are depictions of the devil. But many of the horned figures are smiling and almost endearing, as if the young artists have not quite grasped the nature of evil.

Brian Mooney's Story

In December 1984, Brian Mooney, one of six children of a Hackensack, New Jersey, shoe salesman, was working at the plush Park Avenue offices of Kelley Drye & Warren, “with people who belonged to country clubs and played squash.” Kelley Drye, one of the oldest and most prestigious law firms in New York, was also Union Carbide’s outside counsel. Mooney at the time was a few months out of law school, so when the Bhopal case broke, he was not one of the senior attorneys there. But the entire firm went into frenzied activity, with people working around the clock on the case. Mooney was put to work on legal research, principally insurance-coverage issues. Every morning that December he would open *The New York Times* and read gruesome accounts of the dead and dying and then take the subway to Park Avenue to put in a full day’s work preparing the defense of the corporation that had done this to them.

Mooney had to rationalize to himself the reasons why he was working for Carbide’s law firm. It was, he says, “a naive belief that people, especially people with suits on, are not capable of malice and wrongdoing, especially on such a large scale.” Also, in this case, the opposing side, in the courts at least, was the Indian government, “not a pristine entity either.”

But gradually Bhopal, and other cases he was working on that were even more untenable personally, dominated his thoughts. Mooney, who is gay and a former Catholic, used to celebrate mass on Saturday evenings at a Greenwich Village church with a gay Catholic group. New York’s Cardinal O’Connor forbade use of the church for the services. So some of the spurned worshipers started going to St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Sunday mornings, where, during the Cardinal’s sermons, they would stand up en masse and silently turn their backs on him.

The archdiocese of New York, through its legal counsel Kelley Drye & Warren, sued the protesters and obtained an injunction against them. A woman at the firm asked Mooney to serve the summons; he still isn’t sure if she knew that he was gay, but he laughed and said absolutely not. She never spoke to him again.

Mooney slowly realized that he had no remaining faith in the legal system, that it had an inefficiency woven into its warp and woof. Mooney quit Kelley Drye in 1988. “At the time, I didn’t have any idea of what I was going to do; I was very good at not thinking

about myself because of my being gay." He was 28, and started to ask himself questions that a 14-year-old would ask, about the purpose, meaning, and direction of his life. He knew that he wanted to help people, but he didn't believe law was the way to do that.

After a few years of drifting, Mooney applied to graduate school at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor for the doctoral program in anthropology. He was accepted and given a teaching assignment with a salary equivalent to one-tenth what he used to make at Kelley Drye. In the summer of 1995, Mooney decided to go to Bhopal and study the effects of the legal system on the very people his former employer had commanded him to battle against.

One day that summer, Mooney found himself in the park of the gas-affected women, at one of their Saturday rallies. He was there in his role of anthropologist/observer, ready to note down what the women were doing, why they were here, the structures that they lived within. Suddenly he felt a man tugging at his arm and heard an announcement to the effect that an American visitor would now be making a speech. Mooney was caught off guard, and extremely uncomfortable. "I shouldn't be speaking to them," he thought. "They should be speaking to me." But he found himself, willy-nilly, thrust onto the speaking platform, with a mike in front of him.

Mooney began in his halting Hindi, then switched to English. He told the women that he was studying to be a teacher, and the students that he was teaching at the moment didn't know anything about the rest of the world and they didn't know anything about corporate ethics. These were students who would later go to work for companies like Union Carbide. He was here to gather their stories, he told the women, so he could relate them to his students, so that maybe those students, uniquely powerful because American, would think twice about how the decisions they might make as corporate executives would affect the lives of people half way around the world. That's why he was here, in Bhopal: to gather their stories.

Mooney stopped and looked at the crowd. They applauded politely, smiled, but they didn't really understand. His translator's English was inadequate, and Mooney was left feeling extremely awkward. But, he realized at the same time, he had done something very important for himself: he had just defined his mission, the precise way in which he could help other people. He had been forced to think, and had found an answer to the most universal and least asked of questions: What am I doing here?

A Charge Against Earnings

If there's a happy ending to this story, it's for the Carbide executives and shareholders. Bhopal made the company prey for a takeover attempt a year after the disaster, which forced Carbide to divest itself of its consumer operations and concentrate on its highly profitable core chemical business. In the financial maneuverings that took place during the takeover battle, Carbide gave its shareholders a $33 bonus dividend plus $30 a share from the sale of its battery business, and gave its top executives a total of $28 million in "golden parachutes" to foil future takeover attempts.

Of the $470 million settlement, $220 million came out of Carbide's insurance. After news of the settlement, Carbide's stock actually increased $2 a share. If a person owning a single share of Carbide stock worth $35 in December 1984 had reinvested all

dividends and distribution rights, that share would have been worth more than $700 a decade later. “Clearly, by any objective measure,” says Arthur Sharplin, a management professor who studied these dealings, “Union Carbide Corporation and its managers benefited from the Bhopal incident. It is ironic that a disaster such as Bhopal [would] leave its victims devastated and other corporate stakeholders better off.”

Before Bhopal, the worst industrial accident in world history, Union Carbide was involved in the worst industrial tragedy in American history, the death in the 1930s of up to 2000 of its workers due to silicosis during the building of the Hawks Nest Tunnel in West Virginia. Carbide makes no mention of that episode in its corporate histories.

When I went up to the Carbide headquarters in Danbury, Berzok proudly handed me an effusive Paine Webber report on the company, dated September 1995. It says, “We reinstate Carbide as our number one major chemical stock idea.” Not once does the name Bhopal come up in the report. ♦

How To Help

The Bhopal Medical Appeal has set up an independent, community based clinic in Bhopal to provide day to day care, drugs, counseling, and physiotherapy. It also monitors the long term effects of the gas on survivors. Contributions or offers of volunteer medical services can be sent to the BMA, c/o Pesticide Action Network/ Bhopal, 116 New Montgomery Street, #810, San Francisco, CA 94105. –S.M.