

India Thirty Years on: Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster - The tragedy continues: some commentary and media reports

Monday 8 December 2014, by [Deccan Herald](#), [KRISHNAN Vidya](#), [The New York Times](#), [VISVANATHAN Shiv](#) (Date first published: 7 December 2014).

A selection of commentary and articles in the media by the South Asia Citizens Wire.

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Bhopal's Deadly Legacy

The New York Times, December 4, 2014

by The Editorial Board

It's been called the worst industrial accident in history, and it's not over. Thirty years ago, during the wee hours of Dec. 3, 1984, a catastrophic gas leak from a pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, killed at least 5,000 people, and sickened thousands more who later died or became permanently disabled. Up to 600,000 people were affected in all. Toxic pollution from the accident severely contaminated the soil and groundwater around the site, poisoning new generations who suffer from high rates of cancer, birth defects and developmental problems. The site needs to be cleaned up, but disputes over who should pay, and where and how the toxic waste should be disposed of, has led to tragic inaction.

Justice is another casualty of the disaster. The American chemical company Union Carbide owned a majority stake in the plant at the time. In 1989, Union Carbide paid just \$470 million in compensation to the Indian government — an average of \$2,200 to the families of the dead and \$550 to the injured — and then washed its hands of the matter.

Warren Anderson, the chief executive of Union Carbide at the time of the tragedy, eluded multiple requests by the Indian government to extradite him until his death on Sept. 29 at the age of 92. By the time eight low-level Indian executives of Union Carbide's Bhopal subsidiary were convicted of negligence by an Indian court in 2010, one had already died. The other seven were released on bail and filed appeals. Dow Chemical, which bought Union Carbide in 2001, has staunchly refused to take any responsibility for Union Carbide's past sins.

After hundreds of Bhopal survivors staged a hunger strike last month in New Delhi, India's minister for chemicals and fertilizers, Ananth Kumar, agreed to revise the official number of victims and to pay out additional compensation. This is the least India's government can do. It also needs to strengthen and enforce pollution controls on industry — smaller accidents occur with alarming frequency — and establish emergency procedures to deal with accidents when they occur.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Obama, who are eager to increase business ties between India and the United States, will have an opportunity when Mr. Obama visits India in January to announce a joint effort, enlisting the private sector, to clean up the contaminated site at Bhopal. Dow Chemical should contribute substantially to the effort. The suffering and pain unleashed in Bhopal 30 years ago cannot be allowed to harm another generation.

A flawed rehabilitation policy adds to woes of Bhopal widows

Live Mint, December 4, 2014

by Vidya Krishnan

The widows of the Bhopal gas tragedy live in a residential complex called Vidhwa Colony a Kafkaesque and dystopic world not unlike a penal settlement from another era.

Bhopal: From its tactless name to the design of its buildings and absence of the most basic civic amenities, everything about this place points to neglect and flawed rehabilitationa ghetto of widows who are victims twice over.

Lying a little outside Bhopal's city limits in Karond village, it is a settlement of women who survived the Union Carbide chemical holocaust 30 years ago. Their husbands did not.

They live in a residential complex called Vidhwa (widow) Colonya Kafkaesque and dystopic world not unlike a penal settlement from another era.

Here, the taps run dry, the drains are choked with filth, the drinking water supply line is mixed with the sewage pipeline and electricity supply is erratic.

Nearly every widow here is either a patient herself or cares for someone suffering from ailments caused by exposure to the 2-3 December 1984 leak of methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas from Union Carbide India Ltd's (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal.

The diseases range from cancer, lung injuries and the aftermath of cardiac failures to neurological disorders. "Aise jeene se to maut aasan hai. Jo tab mar gaye, woh bach gaye (it's better to have died than to live like this)," said 56-year-old Jamna Bi, who lost her husband and mother-in-law after 40 tonnes of MIC leaked from the UCIL plant.

The so-called Gas Widows' colony was built by the Madhya Pradesh government in 1992. It is essentially a multistorey slum with 2,486 one and two-bedroom apartments. The state government announced a monthly pension of Rs.275 that would take care of them in their new homes and pay for medical care and other expenses that living entails. This tiny amount remained the same until 2010, when the central government revised it to Rs.1,000 per month. Even this was discontinued in April

2014, after an audit revealed that the arrears had been wrongly paid.

"I was given a first instalment of Rs.18,000. My lawyer (pursuing the compensation case in Bhopal's district court) kept Rs.16,000 and said I could keep the second instalment completely. We were later informed that there was a clerical error in calculation of the pensions and so it was discontinued," said 60-year-old Seema Bi, who now works as a domestic help to make ends meet.

The Madhya Pradesh government's deeply flawed rehabilitation plans for the widows fell to pieces almost as soon as the flats were allotted. To begin with, the government handed over the apartments without ensuring basic sewage disposal, a problem that has now grown to pose one of the biggest health crises for residents.

In 1998, eight residents died of cholera in Vidhwa Colony.

"The height of the building was the problem most people living in the colony had respiratory illnesses and could not climb four flights of stairs. Clearly, very little thought was put into this," said Abdul Jabbar, convener of the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (BGPMUS), a civil society organization fighting to get the women's pensions reinstated.

"None of the top floor houses got water supply. The area was not connected well by public transport, did not have street lights or schools, hospitals or even employment opportunities. This is a classic example of dumping the city's garbage outside in the name of rehabilitation. That place is a dump yard," added Jabbar.

In 2010, chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan had promised to turn Vidhwa Colony into a "model town". On the occasion of the festival of Rakhi, when brothers pledge to protect their sisters, he renamed the settlement Jeevan Jyoti colony and adopted all the residents as his "Rakhi sisters".

The Madhya Pradesh government sanctioned Rs.15 crore to fix sewage and drainage, build roads and maintain the apartment buildings. It promised to set up an Anganwadi centre, a higher secondary school and a vocational training centre in the colony.

Four years later, only the nomenclature remains changed.

Between 1989-1993, over 2,000 widows were accommodated here but over the years, nearly half of the original allottees have moved out, preferring to give the flats out on rent.

"The municipal corporation cleans the area when a politician is about to visit, usually before an anniversary. The sewage system is so dysfunctional that the filth flows back into our houses now. It also gets mixed in our drinking water pipeline," said Irshad Khan, who rents a flat originally allotted to a 'gas widow'. "Once their children start earning, most women move out of the settlement and rent out the flats allotted to them. Who would want to live like this?"

Pensions and official records are buried in bureaucratic jargon that are impossible to make any sense of. According to the state government, Jeevan Jyoti colony has a total of 4,422 pensioners under various social benefit schemes such as widow pension, differently abled pension, senior citizen pension and below poverty line benefits.

Of these, 2,914 people are supposed to have postal accounts. But officially only 873 beneficiaries are registered in the municipal ward and of them, only 350 have post office accounts.

"The main cause of the problem in Bhopal has been faulty survey, which has been greatly addressed through ongoing Aadhaar seeding," said Nishant Warwade, district collector, Bhopal.

This problem, he said, will be solved once all beneficiaries have core banking system accounts.

"The widows pension had run into some difficulty due to overdrawal by some beneficiaries. It has been restarted after an enquiry now with appropriate deductions over a period of time to readjust the (withdrawals). Some unscrupulous elements found guilty in this shall face action as per law," chief minister Chouhan said in reply to e-mailed queries.

He also pledged to fix the drainage system soon. "The sewage system needs a complete revamp on account of changed gradient, which has adversely affected the drainage system." After a proper scrutiny and advice of experts, a Rs.4.12 crore project has been sanctioned, agency identified and work is to begin shortly. The municipal corporation of Bhopal will oversee this work and it should be completed in the next three months," Chouhan added.

Such help will come too late for some victims of the gas leak tragedy, an event that for 30 years has cast a long shadow on Bhopal.

The trajectory of 34-year-old Sunil's life captures these decades of neglect most succinctly.

The night that gas leaked from the plant, Sunil lost his parents and five siblings. Along with his younger sister, he was placed in an orphanage run by the charity SOS Children's Villages in Bhopal.

In 1994, his sister turned 18 and both had come 'of age' and could not stay in the orphanage any longer. "They moved to the widows' colony and initially he was fine. But slowly the lack of a support system started getting to him. He used to work but after moving here, his mental health progressively deteriorated," adds BGPMUS' Jabbar.

He was found hanging from the ceiling of his flat in Widows Colony on 26 July 2006. He was wearing a black tee shirt that said No More Bhopals.

"People have just been boxed together with little or no support from the system. With each passing year, there are fewer of us left to demand rights, fight for it or even remind people of what happened in Bhopal," said Jamna Bi. "Eventually, we will all be dead and no one will be left to chase after the government or companies. They can feel happy thinking that the day is coming soon."

Bhopal Gas tragedy: No accurate data on deaths 30 years on, alleges NGO

Deccan Herald - December 3, 2014

PTI:

An NGO working for the Bhopal gas tragedy victims has alleged that there are no accurate figures available on the death toll of the world's worst industrial disaster even after 30 years and has also raised concern over the toxic waste lying in defunct Union Carbide plant situated near the densely populated old Bhopal area.

Though unofficial estimates claimed that the death toll due to the Bhopal gas tragedy had exceeded the 25,000 mark, official figure stands at 5,295 for whom the government had compensated.

"So far we have compensated for 5,295 deaths due to Bhopal Gas Tragedy," Madhya Pradesh Department of Gas Relief and Rehabilitation deputy secretary K K Dubey told PTI.

However, NGO Bhopal Group for Information Action's (BGIA) activist Rachna Dhingra claimed that as per their information, the death toll had crossed 25,000 since the disaster took place.

"We are demanding compensation for the same, but the state government has so far compensated only for 5,295 deaths," she said.

Notably, the Madhya Pradesh government had in 2012 demanded from the Centre's Group of Ministers a compensation of Rs 10 lakh each to the kin of 15,342 deceased in the tragedy, as per revised figures in Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) report, a government release had then said.

Besides, concern has been raised over non-disposal of 350 MT of toxic waste lying in the defunct chemical plant which is a major cause for pollution, especially water contamination in and around the factory.

Hearings have been going since 1999 in Southern District Court of New York against the Union Carbide Corporation, seeking that the poisonous waste should be removed from its factory in Bhopal, Dhingra said. (MORE) PTI LAL MAS GK SG 12031153

Around 17 people, living close to the plant, supported by some NGOs, had moved the US court in 1999, but the timid response to the case by successive Madhya Pradesh governments has not yielded any result, she alleged.

"It is high time that MP government should intervene in the US court and get the waste cleared," she demanded.

In India too, an NGO moved a PIL in Madhya Pradesh High Court in 2004, after a soil sample test carried out in and around the closed factory revealed that the waste was causing air and water pollution in the surroundings having a huge human settlement. But the toxic dump couldn't be cleared following resistance from different environment groups.

In the last decade, the High Court directed the Centre and the state that the toxic waste should be incinerated after tests at Pithampur in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh.

But the move couldn't see the light of the day after stiff opposition by some NGOs alleging that disposal of the waste at the incinerator will harm people and the environment of Pithampur, Alok Pratap Singh, president of NGO Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangarsh Morcha, who had moved the HC, told PTI.

After this, the HC ordered that the hazardous waste should be disposed of at Ankleshwar incinerator in Gujarat. Again, the NGOs of Gujarat protested against incinerating plan in that state. The Gujarat government petitioned the apex court to review its decision, Singh said.

The Supreme Court had then directed that the waste should be incinerated at Defence Research Development Organisation (DRDO) plant near Nagpur after assessing its after effects, but NGOs protested again in Maharashtra following which the state government expressed its unwillingness in court on the issue, he said.

Maharashtra Assembly passed a resolution against the disposal of the waste at DRDO, Singh said. MORE PTI LAL MAS GK SG 12031153

Later, German company GIZ handed a proposal to the MP government to dispose of the waste in Germany, Dubey said.

However, GIZ backtracked following NGOs' protest in Germany on the issue, he said. After this, the apex court asked that the waste should be incinerated at Pithampur and in a prelude 25-30 metric tonnes should be disposed on experimental basis, he said.

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) got similar waste of some organisation of Kochi in Kerala -like the one lying in Bhopal Union Carbide Factory - incinerated at Pithampur.

"Now we are waiting for words from CPCB to hand over the waste to them for incineration," Dubey said.

After the June 7, 2010, verdict on Bhopal Gas Tragedy, the Group of Ministers (GoM) was formed to look into the problems related to the disaster. The GoM in June 2010 earmarked Rs 315 crore for disposal of waste.

The verdict on Bhopal Gas Tragedy came 25 years after poisonous gas leaked from the plant on the intervening night of December 2-3, 1984.

"...But for the people near the defunct factory, the tragedy isn't over as they still face air and water pollution given that the hazardous waste lying in the factory was seeping into the ground," said activist Abdul Jabbar, working for the survivors of the tragedy.

Bhopal gas tragedy: Toxic waste disposal still awaited

Deccan Herald, 28 November 2014

PTI:

The toxic waste after the Bhopal Gas tragedy lying at the Union Carbide plant here is still awaiting disposal, even after 29 years of the world's worst industrial disaster, amid concerns of air and water pollution.

Though an NGO had in 2004 moved a PIL in Madhya Pradesh High Court after soil sample tests carried out in and around the closed plant revealed that the 350 metric tons of waste was causing air and water pollution in the surroundings having a huge human settlement, the toxic dump could not be cleared due to resistance from different environment groups.

The High Court later directed the Centre and the state that the toxic waste should be incinerated after tests at Pithampur in MP's Dhar district.

But the move could not see the light of the day after stiff opposition by NGOs which claimed that the waste disposal at the incinerator will harm Pithampur's people and its environment, Alok Pratap Singh, president of NGO 'Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangarsh Morcha', who had moved the HC, told PTI.

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the apex court to review the decision,” Singh said.

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A German firm later proposed to dispose of the waste in Germany, but backtracked following protests by NGOs in the European country, Bhopal Gas Tragedy Relief and Rehabilitation Department’s Deputy Secretary K K Dubey said.

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The verdict on Bhopal Gas Tragedy came 25 years after poisonous gas leaked from the plant on December 2-3, 1984, killing over 3,500 people and injuring over 5 lakh residents.

“...but for the people near the defunct factory, the tragedy isn’t over as they still face air and water pollution given that the hazard waste lying in the factory,” said activist Abdul Jabbar, working for the tragedy’s survivors.

Let us not forget the tragedy of Bhopal, or let it become a set of statistics

Mail Today, 7 December 2014

by Shiv Visvanathan

As you become older you realise it is not nostalgia that haunts you. You sense your world shrinking.

People and places that you treasure, who make the calendar called your world just drop out of the map.

One feels helpless as your autobiographical map of the world feels helpless against the new cartographies of the world.

Bhopal’s survivors and NGOs have done great work each year to ensure we never forget the victims of the tragedy

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Bhopal’s survivors and NGOs have done great work each year to ensure we never forget the victims of the tragedy

Mine is especially an oral imagination. One recites an event and in reciting an event, in all its

sonorous beauty, the narrative unfolds.

I also realize orality and embodiment go together. I remember because my mind recites it and my body senses it at its fingertips.

Memory is in many ways an embodiment. When you abstract it as a statistic, it becomes more generalised. It loses its sense of mnemonical poetry.

In many ways, we are still an oral nation. Our memory is collective, contained in folklore and legends, and often festivals and rituals merely enact memory to reinforce it.

I realize I need ancestors and genealogies as frameworks for myself.

Digital

I realize we are now a society where memory is oral, textual and digital.

Memory, now seen as information, is archived and digitalised.

Bhopal Gas disaster survivors hold posters during a protest rally in Bhopal on December 2, 2014
Bhopal film 'tells truth' of disaster on 30th anniversary:... Doctor who treated Bhopal gas victims says state government...

I sense it is a powerful method but I, in my old fashioned way, sense the difference between information and knowledge.

Knowledge has context, is self-reflective; it has a cosmology and an epistemology.

Information is discreet, fragmented, atomised and abstract.

Knowledge connects. Knowledge enables story telling.

Information creates fragments of narrative. I am using this long winded introduction to think about memory, memorials and museums in India.

We tend to treat sacred groves with respect. Taboo creates the song lines of memory and we treat as sacred the black buck or the tulsi plant.

Our relationship to them is ritually immaculate.

But look at the way we treat stone walls as sites for graffiti.

"Mona loves Mohan" is our answer to the beauty of rock, to the wonderful historicity of the Qutub, the Taj or to old monuments.

Graffiti as personal signature becomes more relevant as an event than the monumentality of history.

Bhopal was the world's worst industrial disaster or that over 5,000 people were murdered during the 1984 riots

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We do not seem to treat monuments with reverence.

In fact our memories have a way of being silly or trite.

Our folk memory is creative but what I call mass memory seems to be trite.

I remember a lazy conversation where my friends and I differentiated kinds of mass memory.

There is a touristy memory where we treat events as outside us and we trivialise memory.

Here memory is sentimental, scattered and focuses around “selfie-like occasions.”

So Goa rather being a collective memory of the Portuguese becomes food in a particular restaurant or the band that played funky music.

Cynics add what they call “tutorial college” memory. This is bowdlerised memory, playing Charles Lamb to Shakespeare.

Tutorials are summaries that make a complex event accessible.

They create a pedagogy of access. Our sense of nationalism and science has a tutorial college edge to it.

We talk of ancient science not as a philosophy, a world view but combining tutorial and tourist views of memory.

Modi’s idea of plastic surgery in India is a good example.

There is a third approach to memory which I call folk statistical.

The mind can reel of factoids and statistics of cricket matches, factory output and disasters with equal ease.

Statistics, as Camus said, may not bleed but they do help domesticate reality.

We recite statistics to reveal the grasp of an event.

We say Bhopal was the world’s worst industrial disaster or that over 5,000 people were murdered during the 1984 riots.

Numbers conveys a sense of control and comprehension when it actually alienates and distances us from the event.

We talk numbers when we cannot speak the everydayness of suffering.

Trivialisation

I sense this trivialisation of memory in all the three modes I described.

One feels this deeply when one watches India remember an event like Bhopal.

Bhopal as an event, as a disaster, as a narrative of suffering has eluded the Indian imagination.

Our folklore can remember a flood, famine or cyclone and even a date of birth and death in terms of these events.

Floods are a part of ritual memory but the world’s biggest industrial disaster produces a nameless

silence.

Embarrassed by indifference, the society is then prodded into the act of knowing.

Then our society produces the triviality of memory. We cite Bhopal as an example of disaster tourism, virtually erasing the history of the town before the gas disaster.

Survivors and relatives of Bhopal gas accident victims during a torch light rally on the 30th anniversary of the tragedy

Survivors and relatives of Bhopal gas accident victims during a torch light rally on the 30th anniversary of the tragedy

We cite casualty statistics as if they are productivity indicators we should be proud of.

We cite one or two specimen stories to simulate human interest. But basically we have sanitised Bhopal as an event.

Memory is too trivialised or becomes teratology, a compendium of monsters, of pathologies when we talk Bhopal.

This is why one must pay a tribute to the survivors and NGOs who fought to keep Bhopal alive, who in their battles of resistance that Bhopal reveals itself as a metaphor which has permeated the very nature of life and living.

Survivors

I remember survivors, particularly women, who have fought for justice in Bhopal and justice they realize is not possible without sustaining memory.

Then there is the Bhopal group for information and action and individuals like Satinath Sarangi who have sustained the everydayness of struggle.

I remember my friend Ward Morehouse, a Rockefeller expert, who realised he had got development wrong.

He produces not only a major critique of science policy but the first book on the Bhopal disaster.

Morehouse bought shares in Union Carbide to attend meetings where he could continue the battle.

It is people like this empathising and listening to the survivor that have kept Bhopal alive, as memory, as act of conscience.

The anniversary of the disaster passed uneventfully a few days ago.

I want to thank quietly the heroes, the survivors who will not let Bhopal die.

As they struggle to speak of Bhopal, they keep an everydayness of memory, survival, and heroism alive. For this one has to be grateful.

The writer is a social nomad

The Bhopal disaster: Toxic legacy

The Economist - Dec 2nd 2014

Video: see on the original link

P.S.

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http://www.sacw.net/article10078.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3ASouthAsiaCitizensWeb+%28South+Asia+Citizens+Wire%29