

A PHOTO ESSAY BY JACK LAURENSEN

BHOPAL

THE ENDURING TRAGEDY

A Bhopali woman and her goats walk around the Union Carbide facility seeking water and suitable grazing grounds.

ColdType

“Everybody here feels abandoned and neglected,



A government water-tower looms over the slums in Bhopal. Little water is provided by the government and much of that which has been found to be highly contaminated with E-coli.

but that's nothing new”



India's Bhopal gas disaster of 1984, in which at least 25,000 people died with 500,000 or more still affected, is the world's worst industrial catastrophe. Perhaps the greatest betrayal of the Indian people by the Union Carbide Corporation was not the initial disaster that brought so much suffering to the streets of this vibrant city, but the failure of so many to heal the toxic and painful legacy left behind

HISTORY

has shown us that we are judged and remembered by how we treat societies most vulnerable. The people who are unfortunate enough to live in the poorest areas of Bhopal today continue to live a life of pain and neglect in the shadow of Union Carbide's poisonous legacy. Almost 26 years after the tragic night when tonnes of Methyl Isocyanate gas descended on Bhopal's slums, the area surrounding the UC compound is still unfit for any kind of use. Greenpeace and the Indian Centre for Science and Environment continue to publish reports revealing an enduring environmental and humanitarian nightmare. And for nearly three decades, those responsible have watched from their ministerial offices and corporate HQs as Bhopal's poorest citizens have fought for justice against overwhelming odds.

"In India today, the poor are left behind, all our government and the corporations do is betray us," says Gayadri, a 50-year-old woman living in a heavily gas-affected community just outside the Union Carbide complex in Bhopal. "Our men are too sick to work regularly so we cannot pay taxes. That's why they don't help us. Everybody here feels abandoned and neglected, but that's nothing new."

Union Carbide openly dumped lethal waste

“We have been asking for safe water – when election time comes around they promise such things but they never keep their word”



Above: A jubilant boy pours water over his head as a government pipeline is finally turned on near his home. It's not known if this water is safe, much that is provided is not.

Right: View of gas and water-affected communities from a water tower in Bhopal, India.

in the surrounding areas for years before the tragedy, and water and soil contaminated with chemicals and heavy metals continues to claim many lives, while entire communities suffer from painful, debilitating illnesses. Gayadri continues, “We have been asking for safe water for so long – when election time comes around and they want votes they turn up and promise such things but they never keep their word. This kind of problem, if it was happening in a rich community, would have been sorted long ago.”

A wave of renewed focus on Bhopal and the issue of corporate liability followed the Gulf of Mexico oil spill and, shortly after President Barack Obama's scathing public attacks on BP, his National Security Advisor Mike Froman caused outrage when he sent what was interpreted as a veiled threat to India, saying in leaked private emails with counterparts in New Delhi, “We are hearing a lot of noise about the Dow Chemicals issue. I trust that you are monitoring it carefully.” In an apparent attack on the momentum-gathering protest movement in India, he said the Indian government should “avoid developments which put a chilling effect on our investment relation-

ship.” Survivors in Bhopal condemned the statement, saying it confirmed that the US and Indian governments were far more concerned about commercial interests than real justice.

Dow Chemicals – which acquired Union Carbide and all of its assets in 2001 – refuses to take any responsibility for social and ecological damage in Bhopal, arguing that taking over UC, despite obtaining the company's wealth, should not leave them with inherited responsibilities and liabilities. The corporation is now facing renewed lawsuits in the Indian and American Courts as the Indian government and activists try to force them to pay for a final cleanup.

JARS and sacks containing Carbon Tetrachloride, Chloroform, Benzene, Ethylyn Glykol, Methanol and other highly toxic substances are smashed and abandoned merely yards away – and often downwind – from where children gather water and graze their animals. The toxins littering the decaying facility are potentially lethal even after short-term exposure. Most are highly carcinogenic and destroy the immune, respiratory and central nervous systems – although, ironically,





Above: Dumped toxins left behind in Union Carbide's Bhopal complex.

Right: A distressed child endures significant pain after a difficult physiotherapy session at the Chingari Centre in Bhopal.

Far Right: Children pump water from heavily polluted groundwater sources.





“We were all enjoying ourselves so much. Then there was a slight smell of burning and people’s eyes started to sting”



A woman washes her clothes with government-provided water which she says it is not safe for drinking: “It makes us sick and gives us ulcers and rashes – it’s no good.”

some of them taste and smell sweet.

Greenpeace and other organisations have found terrifyingly high concentrations of these chemicals, and metals including zinc and mercury in the local water and soil. A large and expensive clean-up has taken place in recent years to secure large amounts of poisonous substances that were left behind by Union Carbide but, and despite tonnes of the stuff being locked up in warehouses or dumped in other states, huge quantities of these dangerous contaminants remain. (In fact, after discovering large deposits of abandoned chemical waste within the UC complex, I was hospitalised for five days suffering severe respiratory failure.)

Union Carbide and Dow’s failure to decontaminate what was once its “Indian Jewel” has created a vacuum of responsibility. Many state hospitals and clinics do not acknowledge the water and soil contamination, leaving 40,000 chronically ill patients without access to healthcare. However, the Sambhavna Clinic and Chingari therapy centre for disabled children offers entirely free treatment to the sick and dying in Bhopal who would otherwise be without hope.

Funded by the Brighton (UK)-based Bhopal Medical Appeal, Dr. Satinath Saringi established The Sambhavna Clinic in 1995 to tackle Bhopal’s legacy of illnesses. “Treatment here was a problem, it wasn’t providing any sustained relief and in the big hospitals people were just being

pumped full of huge amounts of potentially dangerous drugs without any medical protocol,” Saringi said. “We were also seeing significant profit from huge contracts with pharmaceutical giants. On top of this, various studies concluded that some of the initial healthcare in Bhopal was having a hugely detrimental effect on victims of the disaster, while investigations by The International Medical Convention on Bhopal found rampant abuse of steroids and psychotropic drugs. This was, and still is, a recipe for disaster.”

Reshma, aged around 70, survived the initial gas-cloud on that December night in 1984 but has endured agony and sickness ever since. “There had been a few young couples getting married in the neighborhood, there was such jubilation, we were all enjoying ourselves so much! Then there was a slight smell of burning and people’s eyes started to sting. We thought it was chillies or incense, nobody worried initially. Then suddenly a panicked white horse that had escaped from one of the weddings galloped down the street, let out a terrifyingly painful whinny and collapsed, suffocating on the ground. That was when it began.”

After the accident in the Union Carbide factory in which water was mixed with highly reactive and deadly methyl-isocyanate, a devastating chemical reaction spawned a huge toxic gas-cloud which was blown towards Bhopal’s poorest communities by a strong wind. Due to





That night the gas, which was heavier than air, inflicted agonising deaths on thousands. Union Carbide had earlier said the chemical was simply a “mild irritant”



intense cost-cutting measures implemented by the American management of UC, no safety protocols or systems were operational, not even an effective alarm. Forty two tonnes of MIC was stored at higher temperature than it should have been to avoid dangerous chemical reaction. That night, the gas, which was heavier than air, inflicted agonising deaths on thousands. MIC exposure caused organ failure, destruction of the respiratory system, blindness and eventually a terrifying, painful death. Union Carbide had earlier said the chemical was simply a “mild irritant.”

Caught in the panic, Reshma was separated from most of her family except her husband and granddaughter. After escaping the cloud, she sat with her husband in the street as he eventually went blind, choked on his own congealed blood and suffocated – uttering with his last breath that he would always love her. “Ever since that night I have endured pain in my joints, headaches and chest, not to mention the pain in my soul of having lost my family. I have nobody now. My granddaughter passed away a few years ago and I just have my agony and loneliness.”

Reshma received years of treatment from the

Bhopal Memorial Hospital but the medicines had not worked; now, at Sambhavna, she had finally found treatment that alleviated some of her pain. “The herbal medicines help with the chest pains and headaches, they also get me to do yoga and massage to help with the joint pains, said Reshma, as she sat on a bench in the clinic under a sign which reads, “A heart-felt thank you to the ten thousand British people who donated and made this clinic possible.”

Dr. Saringi, who arrived in Bhopal as a volunteer the day after the disaster and never left, has implemented unique treatment combinations in his clinic. “By integrating traditional herbal treatment, with yoga, massage and modern medicine we are able to provide more sustained relief. On top of this, we’re not adding to the toxic load in people’s bodies by prescribing copious amounts of drugs unnecessarily,” he said.

Dr. Saringi is skeptical of the role Bhopal Memorial Hospital plays in healing the city’s wounds; “The BMH, despite their funds and specialist equipment from Union Carbide, lack essential things like a gynecology unit. Troubles with women’s menstrual cycles and other gynecological

Above: A woman is treated for malaria at the Sambhavna Clinic in Bhopal. Toxins in the water and soil are known to attack people’s nervous and immune systems making them vulnerable to diseases.

Left: A disabled child who is making progress with her therapy looks out onto the streets of Bhopal from the Chingari Therapy Centre.



Above: A boy rides his bicycle past the graffiti covered walls of Union Carbide.

Right: A disabled child born to gas-affected parents is treated for hereditary illnesses at the Chingari Therapy Centre.



“Troubles with women’s menstrual cycles and other gynecological issues are a problem but they just don’t address this issue”



Above: A little girl receives speech therapy at the Chingari Centre.

Left: A survivor of the initial 1984 gas disaster and now a prominent activist for the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal.

ecological issues are a huge problem in Bhopal but they just don’t address this issue. They also don’t acknowledge the water contamination and provide any care to those patients. Treatment at BMH often does more harm than good.”

MOST people are unaware of the dire ecological problems that persist near UC – due to an irresponsible and effective disinformation campaign waged by the state government of Madhya Pradesh. Citizens don’t know the water contains mercury concentrations millions of times higher than World Health Organisation recommended limits and that the factory is still littered with toxic chemicals and poisonous dust.

The Union Carbide site is one of the only places where people can find suitable grazing ground for their livestock and groundwater for washing and cooking. People also use the highly toxic soil from dumping grounds to build their houses. Efforts to secure the poisonous site have been useless, the large steel gate is constantly open and seven-foot high walls are full of holes and in some parts entirely demolished. Government ministers have told residents – despite overwhelming scientific evidence and the overflowing clinics – that everything is fine and that



“I am building beautiful cities! Clean cities! Perfect cities with good roads, wonderful parks and clean water!”



Above: The highly poisonous Union Carbide facility in Bhopal.

monsoon rains have washed away decades of dumped contaminants.

“Ever since 1984 the state and national governments have attempted to downplay the damage to avoid discouraging more foreign investment. The first thing the government did in Bhopal was order the army to come in with trucks and collect corpses, then dump them in the rivers and lakes to make it look as though there were less casualties. Now many departments are downplaying the environmental damage,” one survivor – now a doctor – explained.

In 2005 the Supreme Court of India ruled that the State Government of Madhya Pradesh must provide clean water to its citizens. It wasn't until 2008 that they finally started laying pipelines and arranging regular water-truck deliveries – these provisions however, are only reaching around 17% of the affected communities, everybody else continues to drink contaminated water.

Minister Babular Gaur is the senior minister responsible for gas relief, rehabilitation and “development.” He boasted, “I am building beautiful cities! Clean cities! Perfect cities with good roads,

wonderful parks and clean water!” When asked if he thought dying of kidney failure or watching your child slowly go blind was beautiful, it wasn't a subject he was keen to discuss. “We are providing perfectly clean water to all of the affected communities and there are no complaints, people are not sick, nobody has died, they have the same access to clean water as everybody else in this city!” Evidence shown to Minister Gaur that up to 80% of the communities still use Union Carbide's contaminated water pumps was ignored. He insisted they were all closed.

Dr. Saringi said water supplied by the state government had tested positive for E-Coli and other bacterias. He said: “The government is being criminally negligent and mixing safe water with water sourced near an open sewer channel to save money, but these communities are full of expendable people who are too sick to work and don't pay taxes, so what do they matter?”

Minister Babular blames the people for the E-Coli. “These slums are so filthy and their sanitation is so bad, they throw their waste everywhere and wonder why they get sick.”



The International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal blames the persistent problems on government corruption and Dow Chemical's constant refusal to accept responsibility. "Since 1984, the state government – irrespective of the political party in charge – has misused and misappropriated funds meant for medical care, environmental repair and rehabilitation. In 26 years our government has received hundreds of millions of US dollars in aid from the central government and it just evaporates," says Saringi, "Dow Chemicals has acquired all of Union Carbide's equity and all of its liabilities. Union Carbide designed, supervised, and operated the waste disposal process in Bhopal but never paid out for subsequent environmental destruction. We demand that Dow Chemicals accept responsibility."

In June, the Indian Government approved plans for renewed financial and logistical aid to Bhopal, but activists fear this money – estimated at hundreds of millions of US dollars – will evaporate after trickling through the state government bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court of India continues to seek \$US 75,000,000

in compensation from Dow Chemicals for a conclusive cleanup of the area.

Those who continue to evade the Indian Courts and Interpol arrest warrants have not been forgotten. Leela Bi, 52, a survivor and activist whose daughter recently died from water-contamination told me, "The people of Bhopal still await justice for our dead children and for Union Carbide to be held accountable in a criminal court. There have been no steps in the last 18 years to bring the American management to justice and we continue to demand Warren Anderson and his colleagues be extradited to India for culpable homicide." – **Jack Laurenson**

● For more information on the work being done to heal Bhopal, please visit the Bhopal Medical Appeal's website: www.bhopal.org

● Jack Laurenson is a photojournalist and founding member of Lacuna Media. He is based out of London and works regularly in India. To see his whole photo-essay from Bhopal, please visit: www.lacunamedia.org

Above: Any evidence of development and investment in gas-affected areas is invisible.

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