

DEATH TRAP

Twenty-five years since lethal gas escaped from the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, killing thousands and injuring hundreds of thousands, the poison still lingers. **Mick Brown** travelled to India to meet the victims of the world's worst industrial accident who have not given up the fight for compensation, justice and their lives. Photographs by **David Graham**



The immensity of the death toll would seem to demand silence, but nature is indifferent to suffering. As you walk through the derelict Union Carbide factory in Bhopal there is the sound of birdsong and the chirruping of cicadas. Sunlight streams through the trees, dappling the vines that creep over the rusting gantries, pipelines and towers. Grass has overgrown the paved footpaths. In any other country in the world, you think, all this would have been demolished long ago, all trace of its terrible history swept into oblivion, but here it stands, like a surreal art exhibit of industrial catastrophe.

Few people come here nowadays. At the main gate, guards in khaki uniforms, killing time over a game of cards, scrutinise your papers with bored expressions before waving you through. Lizards scuttle into the undergrowth as you pass. In the old control room, the floor is strewn with rubbish. Along one wall, the dials that signalled the disaster have long since been ripped from their panel, leaving a row of neat, circular holes. A sign attached to the wall mockingly announces SAFETY IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS.

'And this is tank number 610,' said TR Chouhan, who worked here as an engineer for nine years before that fateful night of December 2 1984, and whose life ever since has been dedicated to telling the world the truth about what happened. He pointed to a rusting steel tank, the size of a locomotive, lying on its side, half hidden in the undergrowth. The tank had been encased in a concrete carapace, but on that night, propelled by the force of the chemical reaction taking place inside it, it had been ejected like a rocket, sending it spinning on its side. 'And there is where the gas leaked,' Chouhan gestured to a tall, blackened finger of

Thousands died as they slept. Thousands more ran panic-stricken through the streets in a desperate attempt to escape

steel piping, some 120ft high, from which, shortly after midnight, some 40 tons of highly poisonous methyl isocyanate (MIC) poured into the sky.

The gas disaster at Bhopal was the world's worst ever industrial accident. Exact numbers are unknown, but most estimates agree that about 8,000 people died from poisoning within 72 hours of the gas leaking into the air. An Amnesty International report published in 2004 concluded that a further 15,000 people had died in the years afterwards as a direct result of long-term gas-related effects, and that 100,000 people continued to suffer from 'chronic and debilitating illnesses for which treatment is largely ineffective'. The compensation tribunal set up in the aftermath concluded that more than 500,000 people in Bhopal suffered some damage, injury or trauma as a consequence. (By comparison, Chernobyl is estimated to have caused 57 direct deaths, with some 4,000 additional deaths from cancer among the approximately 600,000 most highly exposed people.) 'Nobody in Bhopal's life was untouched,' Chouhan said. 'What happened here was a crime. And the culprits have never been brought to justice.'

Today, the casual visitor to Bhopal would have little inkling of the magnitude of the disaster that befell the city 25 years ago. The state capital of Madhya Pradesh in the geographical centre of India, with a population of about 1.8 million, Bhopal is a vibrant and noisy city, its streets choked with buses and motorcycles, its people seemingly too busy getting on with their lives to look over their shoulders at the past. Only in the immediate vicinity of the factory is its legacy visibly apparent. On the high factory walls along what is still known as Union Carbide Road, fresh graffiti defies attempts by the local authorities to obliterate the memory of the past: JUSTICE FOR BHOPAL and UNION CARBIDE YOU CAN'T HIDE. WE CHARGE YOU WITH GENOCIDE. Across the road stands a small memorial, a statue of a woman, one hand over her eyes as if to shut out the horror before her, the other clutching a baby to

her chest. A plaque reads: NO HIROSHIMA, NO BHOPAL, WE WANT TO LIVE. Street urchins clamber over the railings around it and cling on to the statue, laughing, apparently without a care in the world.

When the Union Carbide plant was established in Bhopal in 1969, it was regarded as an integral part of India's 'Green Revolution', a government scheme to feed the masses by boosting grain production using high-yield seeds that demanded a heavy use of fertilisers and pesticides. The plant was built to manufacture the pesticide carbaryl, under the trademark Sevin, which had been developed in 1957 as a 'safe' alternative to the controversial dichlorodiphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT). 'Science helps build a new India,' ran the Union Carbide slogan.

Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) was an American company, but the plant was run by a local subsidiary, Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) in which UCC had a 51 per cent share. Bhopal had been chosen as the location because of its geographical position, and because of the ready supply of cheap labour. The plant was built in a former army parade ground close to the heart of the old city, and surrounded by densely populated slums or *bustis*. This location, it seems, was not considered to be a problem.

A key element in the production of Sevin is the

Right medical records of victims of the disaster pile up in a Bhopal hospital. **Below right** the tank that leaked about 40 tons of lethal methyl isocyanate gas lies rusting at the plant. **Far right** the factory control room



Each survivor received 25,000 rupees, £315 by current conversion rates. The average pay-out for a death claim was 62,000 rupees

highly toxic chemical MIC, which is twice as heavy as air, meaning that when it escapes into the atmosphere it remains close to the ground. The Bhopal plant initially imported MIC from Union Carbide's factory in West Virginia. But from 1980 the plant began manufacturing MIC itself. By then, the market for Sevin in India was already beginning to decline, and by December 1984 production at the factory had all but stopped, and Union Carbide was exploring the possibilities of dismantling it altogether. But 60 tons of MIC was still stored in three tanks. Tank number 610 was almost full, containing 40 tons of MIC – well above the recommended safety levels.

At around midnight on December 2, shortly after workers had carried out a routine cleaning of pipes, large amounts of water entered tank 610. MIC is highly combustible when it reacts with many other substances: water, acids, metals and the small deposits of corrosive materials that accumulate in pipes, tanks and valves. The combination of the water and the MIC, and the presence of an iron catalyst resulting from corrosion of the tank wall, caused a violent chemical reaction that spewed a cloud of fatally poisonous gas into the air.

A strong wind was blowing, which carried the gas towards the densely packed slums hard by the plant. Thousands died as they slept. Thousands more ran panic-stricken through the narrow alleyways and streets in a desperate attempt to escape, trampling others underfoot, their eyes and lungs seared by the toxic fumes. Those who ran fastest to

escape the gas likely signed their own death warrants by inhaling the poison more quickly.

Subodh Varshney, who is now a doctor at the Bhopal Memorial Hospital and Research Centre, was a medical student in the city at the time. 'It was chaos,' he told me. 'You don't have hospitals where you can immediately bring 10,000 people. We knew it was gas, but nobody had disseminated any real information. The patients were sitting in masses in big halls and in the road, and there would be one doctor just going along the line with a bottle giving people eye-drops. We were doing resuscitation with two hands, one patient on each side, people foaming at the mouth. We were piling up corpses in a room, then the military were coming and taking them away in trucks.' He shook his head. 'So many dead people.'

Satinath Sarangi – or Sathyu as he is known to everybody in Bhopal – is the director of the Sambhavna Clinic, which was founded 15 years ago to treat victims of the accident using a mixture of Western and traditional Indian ayurvedic medicine, and an activist and campaigner who has spent the past 25 years attempting to bring Union Carbide to account for the tragedy.

In 1984 Sarangi was in the third year of a university course in metallurgical engineering in Varanasi when he heard the news of the explosion on the radio. 'It was very vague,' he told me. 'It said there were fewer than 100 dead.' He decided to travel to Bhopal, to volunteer for relief work. 'I thought

I would come for a week. And then the week just kept getting longer. What struck me was the magnitude and the helplessness of it all. You came out of the train station and there were hundreds of injured all around, thousands in utter agony. And nobody knew what to do.'

There were no precedents for treating victims of MIC poisoning before Bhopal, simply because nobody had suffered from it until then. Union Carbide moved quickly to dampen any suggestion that the gas could be harmful or have any long-term effects. Days after the disaster, Jackson B Browning, the company's director of health and safety and environmental affairs, was still insisting it was 'nothing more than a potent tear gas'.

To this day, Sarangi said, Union Carbide has refused to release details of the exact constituents of the gas or the results of tests that he claimed the company had conducted into MIC's toxicity on living systems. 'They said it was a trade secret.' (Union Carbide's report into the tragedy in 1985 concluded that 'approximately 54,000lb of unreacted MIC left Tank 610 with approximately 26,000lb of reaction products'. But it has never specified what those 'reaction products' were.)

Frustrated at what he regarded as the inadequate treatment being given to gas victims, Sarangi set up a relief and campaigning group, Zahareeli Gas Kand Sangharsh Morcha – the 'Poisonous Gas Episode Struggle Front' – and worked as the manager of a health clinic that was administering injections of the drug sodium thiosulphate, the medical

grade of which acts as a detoxicant. According to Sarangi, Union Carbide's own medical director, Dr Vipin Avashia, had originally telexed confirmation that sodium thiosulphate could work as a detoxicant, but later sent another telex advising against its use. The company, Sarangi alleges, did not want the drug to be used, because its effectiveness would demonstrate that the poison had gone into the bloodstream. The clinic was quickly closed down by the police. Three more attempts to open similar clinics were also stopped, he says.

Steeping himself in studies of environmental health and industrial diseases, Sarangi decided that what was required was a clinic that provided community care and that would be the catalyst for proper research into the ongoing effects of the gas. 'When we studied what medicines people were taking,' he said, 'we found that the chemical disaster had actually produced a windfall for the pharmaceutical companies – which are part of the chemical companies. So one part of the chemical companies poisons people and produces the market for the other part of the chemical companies...' He became convinced that a combination of modern medicine and traditional ayurvedic and related holistic treatments offered a particularly effective treatment to gas-affected survivors.

In 1994, along with the novelist Indra Sinha, Sarangi launched the Bhopal Medical Appeal, which led to the opening of the first Sambhavna Clinic, in two rooms in a building near the plant. Five years ago, with the help of donations from

Greenpeace and a trust established by Dominique Lapierre, the French author of a bestselling book about the tragedy, *Five Past Midnight in Bhopal*, the clinic moved to its present premises – a purpose-built two-storey building in a pagoda style in the heart of one of the areas worst affected by the disaster. The clinic is a model of environmental principles – even the medical waste is treated by solar disinfection. In the garden more than 100 species of plants are grown for use in the preparation of herbal medicines (the clinic grows enough for 65 per cent of all the medicines it uses). About 24,000 people are now registered at Sambhavna, all receiving free treatment.

The effects of the gas on the people of Bhopal have been nothing short of catastrophic. Seven months after the explosion, the Indian government health minister reported that 36 women who had been pregnant at the time had spontaneously aborted, 21 babies had been born with deformities, and there had been 27 stillbirths, all believed to have been caused by the gas. Over the years children have been born with cleft lips and palates, and foreshortened limbs. As well as high incidences of long-term respiratory problems and chronic lung diseases, myriad other illnesses have manifested, which Sarangi believes are directly attributable to the long-term effects of the gas. 'We see so many people coming in with diabetes, hypertension, women reporting gynaecological diseases and menstrual irregularities. These are problems of the endocrine system, but we had no idea at the time

that the gas affected this. There are still no studies to confirm that it causes cancers, but we have found an alarming rise of cancers and a lot of TB.'

The doctors at Sambhavna argue that for many gas-affected patients, ayurveda and other holistic treatments are often more effective than treatment with conventional medicines, which simply contribute to the 'toxic load' already in the system. 'Other hospitals treat symptomatically,' Mrithunjay Mali, one of the clinic's ayurvedic doctors, told me. 'When the patient complains of pain they are given an analgesic; when they have an infection they are given an antibiotic; with a severe infection they are given steroids. It is very common that after a few days of conventional treatment they say they feel relief. But then they come off the medicine, and the symptoms recur. When they are taking ayurvedic medicine or yoga, after three months the symptoms never recur. Ayurveda and panchakarma [a 'purging' of the body through the use of oils and massage] have a capacity to detoxify their bodies.' The clinic claims remarkable results in the treatment of rheumatic arthritis, lumbar backache, joint pains, abdominal problems, loss of appetite, menstrual problems and respiratory problems.

Dr Mali says the clinic has also been successful in the treatment of skin complaints such as eczema and psoriasis with the use of leeches, which are taken from a nearby lake. In a treatment room, he scooped one from a jar and carefully placed it on a patient's infected leg. The leech got to work, swelling as it sucked up the infected blood. 'The patient



feels no pain,' Dr Mali explained. 'Only when the leech begins to suck pure blood. Then we remove it.' He picked off the leech, placed it on a piece of paper and sprinkled it with turmeric powder, which causes the leech to purge the blood. The leech is then put back in water for eight days, until it is ready to be used again. At length it will be returned to the lake. 'This way,' Dr Mali said with a smile, 'we cure the patient, and we save the leech.'

In the clinic's reception area, new arrivals waited patiently, each one clutching their health record book, printed with the legend FOR PEOPLE POISONED BY UNION CARBIDE CHEMICALS. People queued at the dispensary for prescriptions – in some cases packets of pills, in others bunches of medicinal plants.

'I eat five flowers every morning,' Rafat Sayed, a bookseller, told me. He was living two and a half miles from the factory in 1984, and for a week afterwards, he said, his eyes were burning and he had difficulty breathing. But it was only some years later that he contracted diabetes and hypertension – both, he believed, because of the gas. He is now being treated with a combination of ayurvedic medicine and yoga.

Shaqur Ali, 70, had been living close to the factory at the time. 'I was in my house with my family – four children, me and my wife,' he said. 'At first I didn't know what had happened; we ran out of my house, and then I saw smoke and people running everywhere. People were lying on the road, with foam coming out of their mouths. We had to run over them to get away.'

He was working in house construction, but the gas had left him with acute breathing difficulties that meant he has been unable to work ever since. For many years he had been undergoing treatment at a government hospital, 'but the medicines did



over the years place the blame squarely on a mixture of faulty and inadequate equipment, poor maintenance, inadequate staff training and the failure of safety measures. According to TR Chouhan, plant design and safety measures were far below the standards at Union Carbide's plant in West Virginia: 'It was totally double standards.'

More than two years before the explosion, in May 1982, three engineers visiting from West Virginia noted about 100 breaches of operational and safety regulations in the plant, 10 of which

Above the waiting-room at the Sambhavna Clinic, founded 15 years ago to treat victims of the accident using a mixture of Western and traditional Indian ayurvedic medicine. **Below** women living in slums near the former Union Carbide plant collect water from streams still contaminated by the 1984 gas leak

'I am alive, but I am like a dead person. For 25 years I haven't known what will become of me. When I think of what happened I get angry. I think God was looking the other way that night'

not work'. Two years ago he started coming to the Sambhavna clinic. 'I have been given medicines and an inhalant, and that has worked.' His wife and daughter were also being treated here, he said. Another daughter died as a result of the gas.

All his money had been spent on medicines, he told me, and he had lost his house. He was now squatting in a makeshift home on government land. 'I am alive, but I am like a dead person. For 25 years I have never known what will become of me. Whenever I think of what has happened I get angry. I often think my life is useless. I think God was looking the other way that night.'

In an official statement posted on its website, Union Carbide describes the Bhopal gas leak as 'a terrible tragedy', and says that in the aftermath it launched 'an aggressive effort' to identify the cause. In 1986 the company filed a court document in India claiming that the gas leak 'could only have been caused by deliberate sabotage', by a disgruntled employee. But nobody was ever named or arrested. The plethora of independent studies and books that have been published



were classified as 'major' hazards, including the potential for the release of toxic materials in the MIC unit due either to equipment failure, operating or maintenance problems. As production at the plant slowed down, the company cut back further on staff, training and maintenance. On the night of December 2 1984 a refrigeration unit that was supposed to maintain tank 610 at low temperatures (making it less likely to overheat should a contaminant enter the tank) had been shut off – at a saving of about \$50 a day. 'There was only one thing provided for the community – a danger siren,' Chouhan told me. 'And that had been modified a few months before the disaster to a muted siren that could be heard only inside the plant.'

There followed a legal case of labyrinthine complexity, which was to drag on for five years. In the immediate aftermath, an army of lawyers descended on Bhopal, promising to take victims' compensation claims to the American courts – for a price. To simplify matters, it was decided that all claims should be consolidated under Indian jurisdiction, with the Indian government acting as legal representative for all the victims. Union Carbide proposed a settlement figure of \$350 million – the insurance cost. The Indian government demanded \$3.3 billion. In 1989, after three years of wrangling, the Supreme Court of India urged both sides to come to an agreement, and in an out-of-court settlement Union Carbide agreed to pay \$470 million – its original offer, plus interest. This sum, the court specified, was 'for the benefit of all victims' and 'not as fines, penalties or punitive damages' – thereby bestowing sweeping civil and criminal immunity on Union Carbide and UCIL.

Each surviving victim received 25,000 rupees – about £315 by current conversion rates. The average sum paid out for a death claim was 62,000 rupees (£780). In 1991, in a ruling designed to resolve legal disputes, the Supreme Court of India described the settlement as 'just, equitable and reasonable'. ('Five hundred and seventy-two thousand people received compensation,' one campaigner in Bhopal told me. 'Within that group 80,000 were not properly entitled, and an equal number did not get compensation even though they were properly entitled.' He shrugged. 'This is India.')

In 1994 Union Carbide sold its entire stake in UCIL to McLeod Russel (India) Limited, which renamed it Eveready Industries India. As part of this arrangement, Union Carbide was instructed by the Supreme Court of India to finance the building of a hospital, the Bhopal Memorial Hospital and Research Centre, which opened in 1998 to provide free medical care to all those designated by the government as gas victims. As Subodh Varshney, a doctor at the hospital put it, 'It is like patients being given a credit card which gives them unlimited credit for health care for life. A poor person in India could never have dreamt of that.'

The Memorial Hospital has facilities to rival any in India, and treats a volume of patients, and offers treatment at the critical end of the spectrum, that the Sambhavna Clinic could never hope to do. But while all the doctors I met there struck me as being totally dedicated to helping their patients, there has been criticism of the hospital's bureaucracy. A *Times of India* article last month alleged that some gas victims had been denied admission to the

hospital and were forced to seek treatment elsewhere. 'The hospital is treating hundreds of thousands of gas victims, on an ever-increasing scale, entirely free of cost,' Robert Percival, a trustee of the hospital, said. 'Inevitably there will be complaints. Those referred to in the article have been investigated and found to be ill-founded.'

Hasira Bi lives in the same small house in Jaiprakash Nagar, 100 yards from the factory gate, where she was living on the night of the explosion. A statuesque woman in her early fifties, she beckoned me inside, shooing away the small gaggle of children that had gathered at her door, intrigued by the arrival of a foreigner. In one corner of the room, a generator noisily pumped cold air; her son's motorbike was propped against the wall. She gestured for me to sit on the divan that was the sole item of furniture, and settled herself cross-legged on the floor.

In 1984 Hasira lived here with her husband, their four children and her mother-in-law. The family were poor, she said. They worked hand-rolling bidis: the pay was 10 rupees (13p) for 1,000 cigarettes – about as many as they could make in one day. Despite its proximity, she said they knew nothing of what went on in the Union Carbide factory: 'We thought they made batteries.'

Shortly after midnight on December 3, Hasira was woken by her husband complaining of a strong smell. 'He was coughing and said somebody had been burning chillies, and I also started coughing; we couldn't understand who would be burning chillies at that time. Our eyes were watering and it was hard to breathe.' One child, a daughter, was staying elsewhere. Quickly Hasira wrapped her 11-month-old son in a bedsheet and ran from the

Hasira said, and he was ashamed that he could not support his family. She has not seen him since.

Hasira is now a campaign worker for the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, a pressure group set up in 2002 to consolidate the efforts of a number of survivors' groups. Much of the ICJB's work has been focused on the issue of the contamination of water supplies by toxic waste that was being dumped in and around the factory from the time of its opening, and chemicals that remained stored there after its closure in 1984.

In 1998 ownership of the site reverted back to the state government of Madhya Pradesh. In the following year, a survey conducted by scientists from Greenpeace revealed 'substantial and in some locations severe' contamination of land and drinking water supplies of a level 'likely to have serious consequences for the health and survival of the local population'. Chemicals that have been linked to various forms of cancer were discovered, as well as trichloroethene, known to impair foetal development, in concentrations ranging from five to more than 500 times the safety limits specified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Determined to test the water himself, Dominique Lapierre drank half a glass from a nearby well. 'My mouth, my throat, my tongue instantly got on fire,' he wrote, 'while my arms and legs suffered an immediate skin rash.'

In 2001 Union Carbide was taken over by Dow Chemical, then the world's largest multinational chemical company. Dow has consistently denied any liability, either for claims of compensation for those who have suffered poisoning as a result of

Sanjay, Mick Brown's interpreter, lost his mother, father, three brothers and two sisters in the disaster

site contamination, or for cleaning up the site. In a statement to the *Telegraph*, Scot Wheeler, a spokesman for Dow, said that the company had 'deep sympathy' for the victims of the Bhopal tragedy, 'and agree that remediation should proceed'. However, he went on, 'the "polluter pays law"' in India 'applies to those who owned and operated plant sites'. The Bhopal site, he said, 'was owned and operated by UCIL, a separate, publicly traded Indian company – which is now Eveready Industries India Limited – a company that continues to operate in India today and is the company that was involved in the tragedy.'

In 2004, after protests from survivors' groups, the Supreme Court of India ordered the state government of Madhya Pradesh to supply fresh drinking water through tankers to all those living in the areas where potable water was contaminated with pollutants. But little changed. Two years later, 60 gas survivors marched the 500 miles from Bhopal to Delhi, to petition the prime minister, Manmohan Singh, with four basic demands: to provide more financial support for the rehabilitation of gas survivors; to clean up the toxic waste at the plant; to honour the promises to provide clean drinking water; and to take legal action against Dow Chemical over the water poisoning. According to Raghu Karnad, a journalist for the Indian publication *Teelka*, Singh nodded at the first three demands, but when presented with the fourth put his hands over his ears.

Last year, after survivors had again marched on Delhi and staged hunger strikes, the government promised to lay water pipelines to all the contaminated areas by April 2009. But when I visited Bhopal in March, pipelines had been laid to only six of the 14 affected areas, and according to the ICJB some 20,000 people were continuing to drink contaminated water. One of these areas is Atal Ayub Nagar, at the northern edge of the plant, where in the past 20 years a shanty town has grown up on a strip of land between the factory's perimeter wall and a railway track. Homes have been fabricated from wood, wattle and daub and, occasionally, brick – some, it seemed, pillaged from the factory wall itself, leaving gaping holes for people to wander in and out of the site at their leisure.

I had seen the ramshackle buildings of Atal Ayub Nagar from the other side of the wall, while exploring the factory with TR Chouhan. He led me to an open expanse of dusty, caked earth, spotted with sparse vegetation. This, he explained, had been one of the solar evaporation ponds for toxic waste. A group of children were playing cricket, while cattle grazed on the scrub. 'Smell,' Chouhan said. He scuffed at the dry earth with his foot, raising a cloud of dust with the unmistakable bitter-sweet smell of chemicals. Nearby, more children were filling zinc buckets with water drawn from a standpipe, and carrying them back to the houses, their shouts and laughter carrying on the air. Many of those living in Atal Ayub Nagar are migrants who have come to Bhopal in search of work. The average wage here is about 100 rupees (£1.30) a day. A man named Mian was sitting on the step outside his home with two of his six children. He was 36 or 37, he said, and could neither read nor write. He worked as a porter in the market, earning anywhere between 50 and 150 rupees a day. A ration of fresh

What did he think should happen to Warren Anderson, the former chairman of Union Carbide? 'People have said they want him to be hanged. But what good would that do? He is an old man now'

house. Her husband grabbed another child. The streets were filled with people, shouting and running in all directions. At length the family reached the safety of a college. It was only then that Hasira realised that in their panic they had left behind their four-year-old son. She rushed back; outside the house, she found her son lying on a handcart, unconscious. He had been taken for dead.

A few days later, the family joined the evacuation of Bhopal; for two weeks they lived in a village nearby until they were told they could return home. By then, she said, the health of her children had begun to deteriorate. Her son would spend the next eight years in treatment. 'A doctor told me that the MIC had poisoned his blood and spread throughout his body.'

In the meantime, Hasira had been given work as a seamstress in a government centre set up for victims of Bhopal. There were 2,300 women working there. When she discovered that they were being paid less for doing more than at another centre, she organised a strike. So it was that the bidi worker became an activist. Her husband walked out in 1992. The disaster had left him unable to work,



water was delivered in a tanker every three or four days, he told me, and when it ran out the family would draw ground water from a hand-pump. 'We know it is contaminated, but what can we do?'

While the settlement with Union Carbide in 1989 appeared to draw a line under the matter of compensation for gas victims, it was not the end of legal action against Union Carbide and Dow. For the past 10 years, a class action suit brought against Union Carbide by various individuals and survivors' groups has been proceeding through a New York court, seeking compensation for victims of water contamination and money for medical monitoring and environmental remediation of the factory site. A similar case is also rumbling through the courts in India.

'Over the years, Union Carbide have made the legal process so complicated that there has been a danger of people stopping caring or paying attention,' H Rajsharma, the lawyer prosecuting the US case, said. 'They have used the international character of the case as a weapon of obfuscation. And as you see more businesses spanning the globe so you'll see these kinds of problems occurring more frequently. Bhopal is a textbook case that some kind of supranational law is needed to address.'

'The way in which the people of this city decided not to give up but to fight back has been extraordinary,' Rachna Dhingra, the local coordinator for the ICJB, told me. Bhopal, she said, has inspired other movements around the world to fight against what she describes as 'corporate crime', and in their demands for accountability. 'Twenty-five years is a very long time to keep fighting.'

Rather than seeing the factory demolished, Dhingra said the ICJB would like to see the site

would later be awarded as compensation) and allowed to fly back to America the following day.

In 1989 the criminal charges against Anderson and Union Carbide were dropped as part of the financial settlement between the company and the Indian government. But in 1991 the Indian Supreme Court revoked the criminal immunity and the following year a proclamation was issued for Anderson to appear in a Bhopal court. When he failed to turn up he was declared a 'proclaimed absconder'. Attempts by the Indian government over the years since then to extradite him have failed.

Anderson, who is now 88, has never commented publicly about Bhopal, and for many years appeared to have vanished from view, lying low in his homes in Florida and the Hamptons. The last person to gain a public utterance from him was an environmental activist named Diane Wilson, who in 2006 stood outside his home in the Hamptons for two days holding a placard saying WARREN, SHOULDN'T YOU BE IN JAIL? Finally, Anderson appeared. 'He was very tanned and for an elderly person he was very athletic,' Wilson told me. 'We got into a discussion and he pretty much said that he had gone to India, done the right thing and he wasn't willing to discuss it any further. Then he left.'

For three days in Bhopal I had listened to countless stories of suffering, desperation, determination and hope, little realising that the most moving of all had been at my side all along. Before arriving, I had asked the Sambhavna Clinic if they could arrange for an interpreter, and they had provided a young man named Sanjay. He

Raghu Rai's photograph *Burial of an unknown child, Bhopal 1984* became a symbol of the disaster

was studying for a business degree – his dream, he told me, was to come to Britain and train in the hospitality industry. Quiet, likeable, fastidiously punctual, he painstakingly translated every conversation I had, interested in everyone and everything, while giving almost nothing away about himself. Only gradually did his story emerge.

Sanjay had been born in Bhopal five months before the disaster. His family lived in Jaiprakash Nagar. On the night of the explosion his mother, his father, two of his brothers and three of his sisters died in their home. Sanjay was snatched from his cot by another sister, Mamta, who ran from the house with another brother, 13-year-old Sunil. In the chaos, Sunil got lost. Mamta managed to clamber on to a bus that took her and Sanjay to the town of Hoshangabad, 50 miles away, where they were admitted to hospital. In the meantime, Sunil was found on the street and – like Hasira Bi's son – he was taken for dead. He was thrown on a cart loaded with corpses and taken to the river to be dumped. As his body was tipped from the cart, someone noticed he was still breathing.

Sanjay was brought up in an orphanage, and then moved into a house allocated by the government in the 'gas relief colony' with Sunil and Mamta. 'They were taking care of me and my studies.' In 1997 Mamta married, and Sanjay and Sunil moved into an apartment together. In 2002 Sanjay suffered a stroke; he was rushed to hospital, and he was paralysed for 24 hours. 'I'm still not sure if it was connected to the gas.' Sunil was experiencing problems of a different kind. He had long been beset with emotional difficulties, but he now began to develop symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. He made two failed suicide attempts, once by setting himself alight, the second time by eating rat poison. In 2006 Sanjay moved to Delhi for a few months to continue his studies. While he was gone, Sunil hanged himself in the apartment.

What, I wondered, did Sanjay think of Union Carbide? He had visited the factory for the first time two years before Sunil's death, he said. 'And I was feeling very angry. This is the place that killed thousands of people, my parents, my siblings, and the people responsible for this are living a life of luxury. So yes, I was angry.' He shrugged. 'But then after several visits to the factory I got used to it.'

In 2008 Sanjay had taken part in the march to Delhi, and in the hunger strike. He had gone without food for 21 days – the same duration as Gandhi's hunger strike in 1932 protesting against British rule. (I learnt of this only after I returned from India; Sanjay had not mentioned it.)

And what did he think should happen to Warren Anderson? 'People have said they want him to be hanged. But what good would that do? He is an old man now. But I believe he should come and spend what remains of his life serving the people of Bhopal.' He paused. 'My brother also wanted Anderson to be hanged,' he said. 'But the only person who was hanged was my brother.'

For more information about the Sambhavna Clinic, or to make a donation, visit bhopal.org. Alternatively, you can make a donation by calling Freephone 0800-316 5577 or by sending a cheque/postal order to The Bhopal Medical Appeal, Unit 2, The Foundry, 8/9 St George's Mews, Brighton BN1 4EU

In 1986 Union Carbide filed a court document in India claiming that the gas leak 'could only have been caused by deliberate sabotage', by a disgruntled employee. Nobody was ever named

preserved as a memorial. 'It has a symbolic importance. We want it to be restored and to set a precedent in terms of environmental rehabilitation and medical rehabilitation. To the people of Bhopal these are not just structures; it's memory – memory of pain, but also, one day, memory of justice.'

Bhopal demanded a personification of corporate neglect and indifference, and almost from the moment the accident occurred that role fell to the tall, stooping – and increasingly elusive – figure of Warren Anderson, the former chairman of Union Carbide. For 25 years demands to HANG WARREN ANDERSON have decorated the factory walls, and his effigy has been regularly burnt in demonstrations.

Anderson has been to Bhopal only once, when he arrived three days after the disaster in a private jet to reconnoitre the situation. To his evident astonishment, along with two Indian colleagues, he was immediately placed under arrest, and charged under six sections of the Indian penal code with culpable homicide, causing death by negligence, negligent conduct with respect to poisonous substances and the killing of livestock. He was released on bail of 25,000 rupees (the same as each victim

