

## A Legacy of Suffering

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FIGURE 1. "We have no choice but to use the groundwater," says Famidia as she gives her son, Faizan, 13, a bath. "We didn't know when we moved that it was contaminated."

*In December 2009, the Centre for Science and Environment in Delhi, India, released a report acknowledging what those living in the shadow of the old Union Carbide pesticide factory already know: their water and soil are highly contaminated. Extreme levels of pesticides and hard metals such as mercury and lead are being recorded in aquifers as far away as three kilometers from the plant, leading to the chronic poisoning of thousands of residents living in the bustling neighborhoods around the factory. [Key words: Bhopal, contamination, India, poisoning, Union Carbide]*



FIGURE 2. Neighborhood children climb over a wall onto the Union Carbide property.

"Oh, Bhopal's different now," said Anshul, 27, a native of Bhopal, sitting in the airplane seat next to me. "The disaster was long ago. Now there are new businesses, new houses, hotels—it's beautiful around the lake and the park—you'll find lots to photograph, but I don't think you'll find much of a story there."

I was traveling to Bhopal several months before the 25th anniversary of what has been termed the worst chemical disaster in the world—when 40,000 tons of methyl isocyanate (MIC) escaped from the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, India, killing thousands of people almost instantaneously. I had heard some disturbing reports about the struggles of the survivors and wanted to find out what was happening firsthand. Bhopal businesses and the local government were saying that although it was a tragic accident, it was all in the past and it was time to move on. Yet local advocacy groups were continuing to demand help by asking DOW Chemical Company, which bought the factory from Union Carbide, and the Indian government, which owns the land, to clean up the chemical plant and provide better health care. How bad was it and why was no one paying attention?



FIGURE 3. Om Prakesh, 57, guards the Union Carbide factory from a warehouse roof.

There are two ways to visit the abandoned factory site. One can fill out forms in triplicate and wait several hours in a dusty, colonial building for the chai-drinking government official to stamp his seal of approval on each page. Or one can head to the shantytowns that surround the plant. Here, children play cricket, families graze their cattle, and women collect firewood around the rusty warehouse buildings.

"Some days there are nasty smells on the land," said Satari, whose 10-year-old daughter Rukhsar has the mental capacity of a 4-year-old, "and the water is bad. Very bad." Satari moved with her husband to the city for work, and now they live in a tin shack that sits on the edge of a toxic waste dump used by Union Carbide for years before the factory closed. Satari, 28, says she suffers from severe headaches, stomach cramps, dizziness, and very uneven menstrual cycles.

"I curse the day we moved here. I love my family, but what is to become of us?"

Om Prakesh, 57, was a policeman near the railway station on the night of the explosion. He has since been hired by the government to guard the Union Carbide factory, where he works 24/7 for several weeks at a time. He was waving from a rooftop as I wandered the factory grounds with Sadhna, a young local college graduate who was helping me with Hindi translations when needed. We climbed the rusty stairs to say hello. Prakesh was sitting on an old plastic chair near the edge of the roof and yelling every so often to some kids gathering below.

"Come, come," he said, "you must see my world." To one side of his rooftop was the iconic flare tower,



FIGURE 4. Children walk near their homes by the old factory.

designed to burn off any MIC escaping from the gas scrubber but turned off the night of the accident, waiting for the replacement of a corroded piece of pipe. On the other side were the railway tracks and the flimsy homes where hundreds of families still live. And across the roof was a washing line, where parts of Prakesh's uniform hung to dry.

"You couldn't walk on the railway platform without stepping on dead bodies," he said of the disaster. "If I had been working at the factory then, I'd be dead for sure, but now it is OK. The government says it's safe."

Sadhna and I spent many weeks walking through the various shantytowns that run along the outskirts of the factory, meeting family after family. Many stories

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FIGURE 5. A child climbs one of the rusted tanks on the factory grounds.

were similar, some particularly heartbreaking. Only one woman would not talk to me.

"Why should I?" she said. "Other foreigners have come through; they said telling our stories would get us



FIGURE 6. Contaminated groundwater is pumped for daily household use.



FIGURE 7. Rukhsar, 10, has the mental capacity of a four-year-old. Her mother, Satari, has had several miscarriages as well as two stillbirths and suffers from headaches and chronic abdominal pains.

help. But my life hasn't changed. Twenty-five years and it only gets worse."

I could promise her nothing. I apologized and moved on.

"It was like chili powder on our faces, our eyes were stinging," said Bivi Jan. "We were coughing and choking and people were falling down everywhere. It was hard to run and not trip over the bodies."

As she spoke, she stared out of the window of her shack toward the overgrown acres that lie across the street and house the now defunct pesticide factory. The memories are vivid for the 60-year-old grandma, as though the tragedy had just occurred. Twenty-five years might have passed, but she lives it every day through her coughing fits, her headaches, her emphysema, memories of her husband, and her 6-year-old granddaughter Mavis, who still cannot speak, has curvature of the spine, and demands attention around-the-clock. But so do Rajni's children. She is 25 and was born in a small village

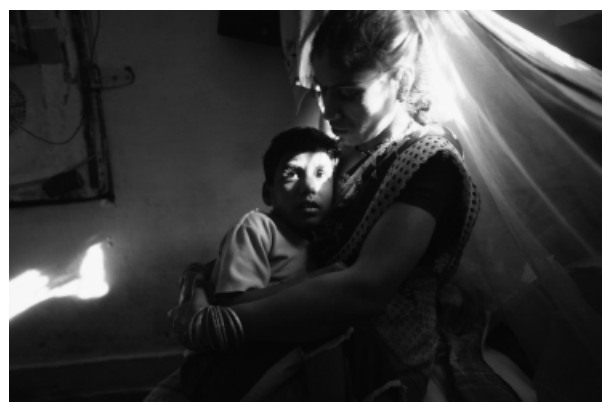


FIGURE 8. Rajni, who has been ostracized by her husband's family, comforts her sick daughter.



FIGURE 9. Radha heads upstairs to feed her son with cerebral palsy, after tending her sick husband down below.

miles from Bhopal. After marriage, she moved with her husband into the housing around the factory. She had several miscarriages, and then bore two children, one virtually blind as well as mentally challenged, and the other suffering from cerebral palsy.

"What did I do?" Rajni asks. "My husband's family will no longer look at me like a relative. They have abandoned me because of the children. They say it is my fault."

Radha rests on the staircase while supporting her husband, Hemant, with the help of her brother-in-law, Maheesh. They slowly make their way to the rooftop. All three are breathing heavily, stopping often before eventually lowering Hemant onto a blanket. Radha wipes her brow and pours her husband a cup of water. Just as she sits, a cry comes from a few feet away, and she jumps to attend her son, Karan.

"Always something," she says as she brushes the flies off her son's face and drops water into his mouth with a spoon. Karan, 13, cannot talk and suffers from cerebral palsy and epilepsy; his spine is so twisted that he



FIGURE 11. Mavis, 6, is mentally challenged, cannot speak, and has curvature of the spine.

is unable to sit or move on his own. His father, Hemant, is 40 years old. Among his many gas-related ailments are failed kidneys. He desperately needs a transplant, but the specialist hospital built specifically to give free treatment to gas victims, the Bhopal Memorial Hospital and Research Centre (BMHRC), says it does not have the facilities and has referred the family to a private clinic.

"Where do we find that kind of money?" asks Maheesh, who runs a spice store to support the entire family.

"We are all gas victims in this family," says Hemant's mother, Prembai, 70, "but we can't get the help we need," she says, bursting into a fit of coughing.

After Karan was born they went to a doctor at the BMHRC mini clinic near their home.

"He told us that nothing could be done and we should leave him for the Gods," remembers Radha, who suffers from severe stomach pains and headaches. "I don't know what we're supposed to do. I feed him, bathe him, and take him to the toilet. He is very heavy." As she speaks, she holds out a tin cup and her nephew



FIGURE 10. Prembai, 70, pours milk down her 40-year-old son Hemant's throat; he has kidney failure.



FIGURE 12. Nitin, 4, has very bad eyesight and needs glasses, twitches uncontrollably, and still has no toilet sense; his sister has cerebral palsy.



FIGURE 13. The majority of children are not covered for free treatment as they are not considered gas victims and the government does not recognize water-contaminated victims at all.

gets up to fill it with water. He limps back. Prembai tells him to roll up his trouser; he shrugs, sits on a chair, and reveals a deformity in his knee that forces his right foot to protrude at right angles. “We are all suffering,” says Prembai, “every day.”

The BMHRC—with its marble interior and luscious, green grounds—began functioning ten years ago with money allocated from the Union Carbide settlement. Union Carbide gave US\$470 million to the Indian government for compensation for the disaster, and families officially registered as victims received 25,000 rupees (US\$540). But no one under the age of 18 at the time of the accident was registered, and many others did not qualify because their papers were not in order.

“We are a super-specialty hospital,” said public relations officer Mazhar Ullah. “We treat all of the gas victims for free.” The hospital has eight mini units in various localities near the factory, where an average of two hundred to three hundred patients are seen daily. Some are given medications, whereas others are referred to their main hospital for more tests and treatment. “We have more equipment than any other hospital here—we can perform open-heart surgery,” exclaims Ullah. He says that as long as patients have a “smartcard”—a plastic ID card provided by the BMHRC to prove that they are gas victims—they are eligible for all the treatment they need.

But Radha, whose husband was denied the continuation of dialysis because there are not enough machines, or Kamla Soni, who is now bedridden but still on a “waiting list” for a smartcard, or the family of Mushtaq Ahmed, who died on the waiting room floor because the BMHRC would not admit him, saying there was no consultant available, would all disagree.

“We went to the mini unit,” said Soni when talking about her husband’s heart condition, “and they referred



FIGURE 14. At the government-run DIG hospital, medical officer Dr. Malik says they treat more than 1,700 patients in any 24-hour period.

us to the main hospital. We went to the main hospital and they referred us to the DIG hospital (a government-run hospital for gas victims). They gave us a prescription, but said they didn’t have the medicines. We had to go to the market and buy them.”

“There are not enough doctors,” says child specialist Dr. Pradeep Shasna, who works six days a week at the DIG. “Most cases are respiratory, heart conditions and eye problems. We give medications and refer bigger cases to BMHRC.”

After many years of looking for help, most victims give up on the hospitals run specifically for them, and try to pay for treatment themselves, going to the numerous private clinics and hospitals that have sprung up since the gas tragedy. But finding the money to pay for treatment is hard.

Hemant vomits throughout the nights now; he cannot walk on his own and needs to be on dialysis, but at 14,000 rupees (US\$300) per treatment, the family can only do the best it can to make him comfortable.



FIGURE 15. Gas victims await diagnosis.





FIGURE 16. Karan, 13, has cerebral palsy and suffers epileptic fits.

“What else can we do?” asks Hemant’s brother. In the heart of some of the poorest slums in Bhopal, under the shadow of the factory, sits an oasis for survivors, Sambhavna Clinic—an acre of land where medicinal plants grow and wooden buildings house both allopathic and ayurvedic doctors. Here medicines and advice are given for free to all gas-affected and water-contaminated victims. It is the brainchild of Sathyu Sarangi, who left his engineering studies in Varanasi to help the gas victims in 1984 and never left Bhopal, devoting his life to the survivors. The clinic runs solely on donations, attempting to help as many survivors as possible through the day clinic and with outreach programs.

About a half mile away from the clinic, two women who lost most of their families to the explosion—Rashida Bee and Champadevi Shukla—were jointly awarded the Goldman Environment Prize for their grassroots efforts to bring attention to the plight of the survivors. They used the US\$125,000 prize money to open the Chingari Trust—a place devoted to the children of



FIGURE 17. The Chingari Trust offers free therapies and medicines to children affected by gas-related and water contamination issues.



FIGURE 18. Leela, 50, marches every year on the anniversary of the tragedy.

gas-affected and water-contaminated victims, offering free physical therapy, medicines, and aid for the parents. It continues to run on private donations. Most children do not receive any free treatment from the government, since they are not recognized as survivors of the tragedy.



FIGURE 19. There are reportedly 425 tons of hazardous waste—though local advocates allege there is a great deal more—stored and buried in the factory grounds.

“So many children are being born with damaged brains and physical abnormalities—and there’s no help for them or their families,” said Bee. “Nobody recognizes the children of those that survived the explosion, or the children who have been living in the water-contaminated areas. We are doing what we can.”

Sathyu Sarangi, Rashida Bee, and Champadevi Shukla are just a few names on a long list of local activists who have devoted their lives to helping those around them. They have twice marched five hundred miles from Bhopal to Delhi with hundreds of gas survivors, demanding help from the Indian government—a government that makes promises to appease the crowds, but rarely follows through. They have organized campaigns to stop DOW Chemical from building plants in other states, and have gone on hunger strikes to bring attention to the fact that what started as a gas leak in 1984 has continued to have a fatal impact on the community due to the abandoned, contaminated factory that still leaks its poisonous toxins into the local aquifers.

Leela, 50, remembers how even the trees went black and lost their leaves the night of the explosion. She marches every year on the anniversary of the tragedy. One of her daughters, Renu, 26, suffers from stunted growth and has swellings over her entire body. Leela’s son has diabetes and a growth disorder that makes him look like a 12-year-old, despite the fact that he is 21.

“I will continue to march until we get justice, until we get some help. Jobs we can do in our conditions, clean water and healthcare,” said Leela.

I stayed in Bhopal until the anniversary, where literally thousands of survivors marched from various

points in the city to the factory gates, culminating in rallies and candlelight vigils. The strength and determination of the victims were incredible.

“Please don’t forget us,” I was told, over and over again.

The time I spent in Bhopal was quite possibly the most intense two months of my life. Day after day I came across too many victims literally rotting away. It was very hard to photograph and yet the longer I was there the more important I felt the imagery would be. Out of context, some of these photographs—viewed individually—could take on mistaken meanings. For this reason it is essential to keep this photo essay whole and to accompany the images with words: the viewer needs as much information as possible to comprehend the whole story.

Overall, I found most disturbing the lack of help for the children. Unfathomable numbers have mental and physical disabilities. The fact that many could have been saved from their pain with access to clean water is appalling. But their poverty makes them expendable.

I received an e-mail recently from Sadhna, who has begun to volunteer at the Sambhavna Clinic. She freely admitted that she had had no idea how people were living in the slums of her city; at school they briefly covered the Bhopal accident in a single history class. She has also stayed in touch with the family of Hemant, whose kidneys are failing:

There is a sorrow news that KARAN son of Hemant is now no more. I went there at their home but they were quite happy that now their piece of heart is away from all the pains.