

## THE BHOPAL DISASTER: Advocacy and Expertise

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It has been over 13 years since the Bhopal disaster. Though much has occurred in the interim, the status of gas victims has not improved nor has the risk of similar disaster elsewhere been substantially reduced. As a researcher, I have attempted to unsettle the stalemate, writing of Bhopal as an icon of continuing environmental crisis at the interface of First and Third Worlds. One key focus of my research has been on ways political advocacy in response to the Bhopal disaster has been imagined, enacted and restrained. In this essay, I focus on the double-binds associated with my own role as advocate for gas victims, while working as an ethnographer. This essay centres on the years I was in Bhopal for field research, from early 1990 to 1992.

Though in Bhopal to conduct Ph.D. research, I spent all my time in political activism, hoping that, in the end, it would 'count' as participant observation. The conundrums produced in process were multiple, provoking continual reflection on how ethnography and direct advocacy collide, yet remain distinct, equally important responsibilities. I briefly recount some of these reflections here, exploring how advocacy became a way to translate between different obligations, possibilities and perspectives.

The first section of the essay sketches the practical context of my work by describing my affiliation with the Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA), a group of middle-class Indian activists working to support gas victims organized as the Bhopal Gas Affected Working Women's Union. The second section describes the specific role I played in supporting the Women's Union, exploring the tensions that arose from the need to simultaneously critique and deploy rhetorics of technoscience, particularly in response to the proceedings of the Indian Supreme Court. The third section discusses how BGIA worked to position itself alongside gas victims,

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acutely aware of the difficulties of sustaining effective and egalitarian relationships when grassroots and middle-class activists work together. The fourth section describes how I have come to see advocacy as a way to expertise, which complicates conventional expectations of comprehensive knowledge through specialization.

### ■ TIMES, OUT OF JOINT

Toxic gas leaked from Union Carbide's pesticide plant in Bhopal during the early morning hours of 3 December 1984. Within a few weeks a new world began to emerge in Bhopal, referred to by many as 'the second disaster'. Many victims remained in hospitals but many more lined up to receive free rations of wheat, sugar and oil, distributed within a government programme which would evolve into the official, long-range rehabilitation scheme. American lawyers had descended on Bhopal 'like vultures', tracking down corpses and force-fitting their meaning onto retainer agreements, often signed with a thumb print and taken away by the trunk-load. Doctors at Bhopal's hospitals claimed that the worst was over, but acknowledged that they knew nothing about possible long-term effects.

Over 600,000 people became recipients of free rations during the first few months of 1985, despite arguments that there were only 250,000 residents living in areas affected by the gas and that an insidious precedent was being set by such arbitrary numeration. Work sheds were established to provide some women with jobs; no rehabilitation centres were created for men as bureaucrats argued that any income they generated would be frittered away on drink—laying the ground for a reorganization of gender roles in Bhopal, with contradictory effects. Victims began to be registered as official claimants for final compensation, sparking intense controversy over diagnostic taxonomies and geographical indicators of exposure.

With time, identification of deaths in Bhopal as officially 'gas-related' became increasingly contested as hints at the significance of paper proof of victimization became evident. Middlemen emerged to help secure this paper proof, bringing further corruption to Bhopal and complicating the role of voluntary sector political activists, who also occupied a social space somewhere between the powerful and the powerless—at crossroads unmarked by signs indicating exactly where expertise was needed and how it should be deployed.

Desperate need for paper proof of victimization has become part of the legacy of Bhopal, as has a need for new idioms through which disaster can be represented, both textually and socially. What counts as expertise has been complicated. Scientific inputs are crucial, to direct diagnostic and therapeutic agendas but also to validate legal arguments. Science, by any name, has been unsettled—by the rigorously nonlinear, unpredictable, cumulative effects of toxic chemicals. The science needed to underwrite fair distributions of compensation in Bhopal is a different science than that which can remedy the suffering of individuals. Meanwhile, universalist claims remain important, to counter suggestions that life in Bhopal is worth less than that in Connecticut, and that double-standards are legitimate grounds on which to build a new world order.

Bhopal's second disaster has been manufactured at the interface of law, science and economics, where culture synergizes with harsh materialities. It is a disaster which has persisted, and operated cumulatively, drawing in a spectrum of issues which implode old blue-prints for directing social change. The 'people' cannot represent themselves in this rehabilitation effort. Neither can the State stand in as guardian. Operations of technoscience must be condemned, while they are relied on. Legality must be upheld, while acknowledged as insufficient remedy.

It is within the implosions of Bhopal's second disaster that I have worked as an advocate for gas victims, and become an ethnographer haunted by the uneven distributions of risk and reward which characterize contemporary global order. The radical convergence of diverse politics and scholarships in my work was neither planned nor has ever been fully explicated. Disaster is unsettling. Established logics and agendas of action no longer seem sensible; urgency directs one's gaze and delimits one's choices. Thus, I have advocated Bhopal—far from perfectly, at odds with claims that the time of responsibility comes after full understanding, when knowledge can steer a direct route between truth and ethics.

I arrived in Bhopal in February 1990, one year after the out-of-court settlement of the Bhopal case by the Indian Supreme Court. I did not plan to stay. I had come to India to do anthropological research on environmental politics in Madras (now Chennai). I traveled to Bhopal to collect material illustrative of the background from which concern about chemical pollution had emerged. Immediately, it was clear that Bhopal could not be conceived as a 'case

study', a bounded unit of analysis easily organized for comparative ends. To the contrary, Bhopal showed no evidence of boundaries of either time, space or concept. Bhopal, as I encountered it, was a disaster that entangled the local and the global, the historic and the future, continuity and dramatic change. Only later would I begin to understand the deeply normative implications of how Bhopal is encased—in management school text books, in particular. In 1990, newly arrived in Bhopal, I only knew that I was, indeed, at the scene of disaster, where injustice was complicated by grossly inadequate modes of conception and description, where everyday life screamed for rectitude, without prescriptions for anything more than symptomatic relief.

Far from seeming a stable point of reference, Bhopal seemed more like a whirlwind—a maelstrom produced by opposing currents, sucking everything into a downward spiral—with gas victims at the storm centre. Furthermore, the parameters that delineated Bhopal as a subject of concern were, by 1990, overtly politicized. The civil suit had been settled out of court, allowing corporate and government sources to insist that the disaster was over, relegated to a history that judicious progress had taken us beyond. Gas victims and progressive activists in Bhopal took a different line, insisting on the development of legal and social mechanisms for 'continuing liability'. In their accounting, the Bhopal case had not been fully and finally settled, whatever the orders of the Indian Supreme Court.

By 1990, progressive outrage over the Bhopal case was directed as much at the Government of India as at Union Carbide. The 'selling out of justice' was blamed on the system that linked the two together, with increasing force as pressure from the International Monetary Fund escalated into initiatives for overall liberalization of India's economy. Bhopal became a symbol: of the side-effects of the Green Revolution; of a corrupt State; of the ways science can be used to legitimate uneven distributions of risk and reward; of the elitism of environmental politics concerned more about tigers than toxics; of globalization and multinational corporations, out of control.

Most immediate was the need to disrupt official claims that the Bhopal case was settled by promise of cash compensation to the few able to prove their status as victims. So I stayed in Bhopal, where my Tamil language skills were largely useless, knowing only that there

was a call to respond to blatant injustice. English language writing skills were the only resource I had to share, and even these were not primed for the task at hand. My task as advocate was to translate disaster into the languages of law, science and bureaucracy. And I was far from fluent in these languages. I had not prepared for working in Hindi. Neither had I prepared for working in the languages of press releases and affidavits. Especially on time for politics.

When I came to Bhopal, I wrote slowly, valorizing patience, carefully crafted nuance and repeated revision—which often took my words to higher and higher (most often ridiculous) levels of abstraction. Advocacy at the site of disaster demanded a different approach. Densely empirical accounts were essential, to support clear statements of problems and alternative solutions. And they had to be produced in an afternoon, or by the following morning. The farthest horizon always seemed to be the next anniversary of the disaster, when journalists could be expected in Bhopal, or a promised but repeatedly delayed proclamation from the Indian Supreme Court. Rushing and waiting became ways of being; writing on cue structured my days, and my understanding of the many registers on which disaster could operate.

The timing of my work in Bhopal was out-of-joint, in more ways than one. It was early 1990. History was said to be ahead of us.<sup>1</sup> The US stock market had crashed, but by 1989 had more than recovered. The Berlin Wall had fallen, setting the stage for international trade talks that promised to harmonize global order, while turning Lenin and Marx into 'little more than icons' of obsolete political ideas.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge workers and symbolic analysts were becoming the new elite, while cynicism about intellectuals escalated and calls for plain speech became high fashion. Complicated tasks of remembrance and rehabilitation were hardly a priority. Recollection was out of vogue.

Furthermore, by official accounts, I arrived in Bhopal 'after the fact', after the 'full and final' settlement of the Bhopal case by order of the Indian Supreme Court. None the less, there was immediate work to be done, writing responses to the process and terms of the out-of-court settlement, in press releases, political pamphlets and legal petitions. I began this work through affiliation with the Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA), a small group of political activists who served as interlocutors and translators for the Bhopal Gas Affected Working Women's Union, the largest organization of

victims and the only one with sustained participation in the legal proceedings.

While I was in Bhopal, the size of BGIA ranged from two to seven people. I was the only one who was not Indian and, for much of the time, was the only woman. Other members of the group came from different regions of India and from different ideological backgrounds, but were all college-educated and English-speaking, though some insisted on 'thinking in Hindi', as a way of refusal and critique. During my last year in India we were joined by a working-class British-Indian woman, trained as a lawyer. With time, she developed an admirable role 'between' the rigid social classifications with which the group continually struggled. Neither foreigner nor native, neither elite nor subaltern, she became a model for translating between social and cultural differences, without denying their force.

In the main, BGIA structured its relations with gas victims through involvement with the Women's Union, despite continual controversy over how the collaboration should be configured. Formed in 1986 in response to urgent needs for medical and economic relief, the Women's Union now has a membership of approximately 20,000 gas victims. Leadership is provided by Abdul Jabbar Khan and a steering committee of 20 women. Union funds are raised through monthly dues of Rs. 5 (15 cents), which support Union commitments to avoid dependence on outsiders, but not much else.

Acute shortage of resources plagues all Union efforts. One way this shortage is offset is through persistent collaboration. The Women's Union has built itself into many different social networks, linking it to other grassroots organizations, to national organizations and to international organizations. There are links with tribal activists in the mining districts of Chattisgarh, with villagers resisting the Narmada Hydroelectric project and with villagers organized to challenge conservation officials, hired to protect forests on their ancestral lands. There are links to various middle-class groups, including Medico Friends Circle, a coalition of physicians and public health professionals, and the Bhopal Gas Victim's Support Group, a Delhi-based coalition of lawyers, journalists and others who have provided support throughout the legal proceedings of the Bhopal case. There are also links to the International Coalition for Justice in Bhopal, organized out of New York to connect environmental and

consumer groups from different countries. In all, the Women's Union is 'the grassroots', but networked nationally and globally. A product of the Bhopal disaster, the Women's Union reiterates its intricate morphology.

### ■ INTERRUPTIONS

From the start of my time in Bhopal I was highly involved in and committed to the work of the Women's Union. Most days were structured by the Union's sense of relevance and strategy, materialized through written response to official statements regarding the health and legal status of gas victims, through public meetings, and through continual negotiation over the Union's organizational structure.

Saturdays were spent at outdoor meetings. Information was circulated. Commitment was fired and expressed. Social relationships were codified and transfigured. Between times were spent writing, organizing street demonstrations and working to secure jobs, medical care and cash relief for victims.

Occasionally, we left Bhopal for demonstrations in Delhi, or to visit other victims of 'destructive development'. I also went off on my own, trying to keep some grasp on a research project redefined to encompass the breadth of grassroots environmentalism in India. Even then, the Women's Union directed my outlook. When I asked about the successes of literacy programmes in Kerala, I wanted to understand how we could structure literacy campaigns among gas victims. When I visited participatory health projects, I worked to imagine viable alternatives to the government hospitals of Bhopal. When I learned about the network of groups opposing nuclear energy, I worried about the isolation that so often undermines local level initiative.

Visits with other women's organizations left the most forceful imprint. So much work remained to be done before women would have the mobility, confidence and authority necessary for extensive participation in Indian politics. But seemingly small moves evoked grand possibilities. Women's involvement in politics, no matter how unauthorized, interrupted business as usual.

Fieldworking within this level of involvement had a definitive methodological effect. It also provoked sharp conflicts of conscience,

though not of the expected sort. A sense of epistemological betrayal provoked by the competing demands of research and politics was not the problem. I felt no obligation towards neutrality or any compulsion to routinize my perspectives according to dictates from elsewhere. Unlike those involved in similar research strategies during the 1960s, I had not been taught that objectivity is the criterion of research validity, or that partisanship compromises comparative insight.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I learned to fear truth claims abstracted from specific sites of articulation, and to disdain all effort that privileged procedure over substance.

Involvement with the Union both refined and restrained my angle of vision. Perspectives were always compromised by political imperative, of often dramatic urgency. This meant that any hope of comprehensive understanding was emphatically foreclosed. Many of the restraints were practical. Because I was seen marching through the streets with Union women, I was not welcome at Government hospitals so only knew of their inadequacies through the effects on the bodies and speech of victims. Because I continually worked to formulate coherent Union perspectives, I persistently downplayed differences within the Union itself. Because I worried so much about the structure of relations between the Union and BGIA, I distanced myself from issues surrounding the Union's internal organizational dynamic and leadership.

My motivation for aligning with the Union was simple, even though derived circuitously rather than from any experience with successful, 'community-based' moves for social change. To the contrary, my own experience with 'community' had often been stifling, demanding loyalty to entrenched social forms and discouraging efforts to interpolate one's identity within new fields of reference.<sup>4</sup> Though my own experience was coded by ethnicity rather than blank victimization, it still left me wary of any demands for solidarity or any promise that collectivity is a good in and of itself. What I could believe in, however, was the need for interruption—the introduction of the extraneous into our ways of thinking and acting, to break the flow of stale or unquestioned truth claims. Feminist teaching about the work of the margins was influential, as was haunting recollection of the ways good people and good ideas could turn malevolent.<sup>5</sup> The name of Heidegger was particularly resonant, warning against philosophies at the service of politics and against

nostalgia for Spirit or People. The call was for engagement, but tentatively, recognizing politics as a balancing act at necessary odds with the clean straight surface of certainty.

Most of my daily work with the Women's Union was clerical. I wrote, in English, in response to both the Supreme Court and the local Relief Ministry. There was no question that the writing needed to be done. I had the resources required for doing it, so I did. It did not matter much whether I agreed with either the logic or strategy of the words I wrote. I was responding to marginalization, not Truth. The truth did matter, however, and the task of constructing and legitimating it was long and arduous.

Many days I spent all my time at my computer, away from the tumult of Bhopal's streets. Like an armchair anthropologist, I waited until material was brought to me for translation and interpretation. Jabbar would come, or a few of the women, and describe what required response. The chair before my computer was one of few in the house, so I often sat above Jabbar and the women, feeling like both queen and servant, fraud and devotee. Staying focused could be difficult. Jabbar could run at least ten arguments a minute, laced with facts, figures and an occasional exclamation of disbelief. If women were there with Jabbar, they would offer rich examples which confirmed and fed the logic we were trying to build. The women also had logics of their own, though often they could not cut through the dense web of words Jabbar provided as our ground.

Most often, I simply wrote what I was told to write, and pushed for justification only when I could not make narrative logic hold. Interpretive moves were necessary, to determine which arguments would be most efficient, and which facts would best sustain them. My task was to produce an organizing principle which held at bay a randomness incongruent with the language of politics. The disaster had to become communicable so I struggled to 'say it straight', while gesturing at information overload.

Translations in many directions were always necessary. I could follow the Hindi, somewhat. Jabbar could translate from Hindi to English, and back again, somewhat. Sometimes other members of BGIA would be around to help. Even then, the translations were never perfect. They were kludge jobs, working with available resources to forge workable even if imperfect schemes.

The basic facts were soon lodged in memory, though always in



need of elaboration specific to the particular turn of politics which provoked our response. What counted as basic facts, however, remained contested. One example: in the immediate aftermath of the gas leak, many working to support gas victims insisted that the sum of affected people was 250,000; insistence on this number as a limit was a response to the distribution of free rations to over 600,000 people, which caused surpluses and black markets, while turning relief initiatives into overt efforts to build electoral constituencies. An even more fundamental critique of the 600,000 figure was based on the seemingly arbitrary modes of discrimination exercised throughout the relief effort. While 600,000 received free rations, only those earning less than Rs. 500 (@\$36) per month were awarded Rs. 1500 as cash relief. Victims earning over Rs. 500 per month were left to fend for themselves, no matter how sick or how much debt they incurred when they fled the city during Operation Faith.<sup>6</sup>

The government never disclosed how these modes of discrimination were ascertained, foreshadowing many other instances wherein ways of categorizing victims materialized as gross injustice. Critiques of the 600,000 figuration of the gas affected community were, then, valid—in 1985.<sup>7</sup> By 1990, the 600,000 figure was a routine reference, validated by the political schemes through which victimization in Bhopal has been configured.

When I first began inscribing the 600,000 figure into most everything I wrote for the Women's Union, I was not aware of its transmogrification over time—within the articulations of those working with and for gas victims. I assumed that this number had remained relatively stable, at least since the official designation of 36 gas-affected wards in late 1985. But, by many accounts, these wards had a combined population of only 300,000.<sup>8</sup> Where did the figure of 600,000 come from, and was it 'accurate'? Given deficits of both time and research resources in Bhopal, I had little opportunity to pursue these questions.

The figure of 600,000 worked well as a stable point of reference in arguments against further extensions of the area considered gas-affected, run alongside persistent criticism of the way many legitimate claimants had been excluded from registration and resources—because computer print-outs had misspelled their names, or had listed their addresses or ages incorrectly; or because they were minors, yet could not be listed on the claims of their parents; or because their

residence address had changed, often due to forced relocation, during which ration cards and other proof-telling documentation were destroyed along with their houses.

Another number requiring stabilization referred to the quantity of people who had been medically examined at any given point. We relied on official figures, as prepared for the courts, because they were sufficient to sustain critiques of the out-of-court settlement of the case. The settlement amount of \$470,000,000 was legitimated with medical categorization data said to be representative of the magnitude of injury and disability requiring compensation. We tried to crack this legitimacy, by consistently pointing out that only a fraction of gas-affected people had been examined when the settlement was announced in 1989, and even when it was upheld in 1991. We participated in the authorization of these official numbers, for specific strategic ends. In other turns of strategy and narrative logic, we overtly undermined these same numbers, insisting that the protocols relied on for official evaluations of health status were grossly unscientific. Though this bifocalism did not involve logical contradiction, it was tricky to sustain. Like a juggling act with no fewer than five balls in the air, each requiring its own spin and balance. The performance was often clumsy, but the show did go on—every day, for different audiences, on any stage available.

Quantification of the problems in Bhopal was necessary. The Union had to mark its position within the contest, so I helped them hold their line. The grounds on which the contest was waged were forcefully uneven and unstable. Facts were tossed around like small boats on a rough sea, propelled by weather patterns from different directions. Few involved believed that this sea could ever be turned to solid footing. Rather than heading for land, navigational tactics were worked to keep the boats afloat, taking advantage of prevailing winds whenever possible and avoiding calm, and its isolating effects, at all cost. Neither vertigo nor sea sickness were my problem; I had the stomach for the voyage, just lacked essential tools: At the outset, I could not remember the numbers. Before coming to Bhopal, my suspicion of statistics and other quantification devices had licensed an almost complete loss of memory. Numbers did not offer me any information, and scale could be determined by other means. 'Bhopal' revoked this license.

With time I would learn the numbers on Bhopal, from many

different sources; the effect was inundation, not stabilization. Unlike its promise, quantification produced neither consensus on 'the nature of the problem' nor ways of rendering the complex into practical programmes. Instead of providing stability, quantification brought an unending onslaught of 'relevant indicators', often marked by the violent extremes of diverse ideologies, all stormily contested.

My participation in the truth claims of the Union was not without anxiety. We wrote in a language of realism, inflected by evangelical fervour. We posited certainty about our facts, and insisted that the enemy could be identified, and must be punished. We denounced those who wavered in their certitude, emulating the unquestionable expertise of those we challenged. Our tone was often shrill, and our style strident. Rank desperation countenanced these moves. Many of the women had been widowed by the gas. Others, while themselves ill, supported large households of people requiring constant care and expensive medicine. They desperately needed a different kind of response from the authorities so their interruptions needed to be loud and, at times, rude.

My anxiety about these truth claims was not due to doubt about their veracity. While I could not 'believe' in the certitudes I wrote, I nonetheless considered them highly legitimate and necessary. It was a matter of focus. For multiple reasons I could not know whether the content of our claims was entirely without error. But, I could be sure of the legitimacy of their form and intended effect. Even if I did not know that we were entirely right, I did know that official descriptions of the disaster were systematically wrong. The need for certitude was thus displaced, attaching itself, by way of the negative, to the Centre rather than the margins. Interruption became the strategic imperative. Making a break in the continuity and uniformity of official articulation, highlighting deviation and other tactics of irregularity.

### ■ TRANSLATING DISASTER, WORD AND DEED

The challenges faced by the voluntary sector in Bhopal are enormous and incongruent. Government initiative is crucial, but operates according to logics which many blame for causing the disaster. Victims urgently need health care, but not at the expense of emphasis on economic rehabilitation—which is beyond the scope of the emer-

gency room model that orients the work of government hospitals. Victims need help proving that they fit within the categorization schemes through which compensation is distributed, even while these categorization schemes demand systematic critique. Victims need a voice in both legal and medical arenas yet lack necessary language skills, so have to rely on 'middlemen' as translators. Most of the middlemen in Bhopal deserve censure, as 'self-interested, bribe-taking goondas'; the need for expertise at the interface of official schemes and gas victims persists nonetheless, even if blue-prints which have defined roles for middle-class progressives in the past have lost their directional force.

Demands for community control in Bhopal are justifiable on many fronts, but all possibility of realization depends on innovation of new institutional forms, which will depend on intensely collaborative effort. Vanguardism hardly seems appropriate within a disaster trajected from enlightened visions of social development through rapid industrialization and scientific leadership. Simple reification of 'community' is equally insufficient. Continuing disaster in Bhopal entangles actors once separated by geography, race and class with needs for markets, biomedicine and legal protection which exceed territorial logic. Distributions of wealth, risk and authority continue to be forcefully uneven, but the politics of change have increasingly globalized, forcing all local initiative into conversations with power for which there is no indigenous idiom.

BGIA originated within these double-binds, caught within competing constructions of the proper role for middle-class progressives in a world system wherein law, science and human welfare can work at dramatic odds. BGIA's task is to work within the double-binds, translating disaster into workable even if imperfect expressions of justice. The paradoxes that shape BGIA are not abstract. Daily encounters with gas victims and the official rehabilitation apparatus in Bhopal horrifically materialize ideological critiques of the State, of bureaucratic rationality, of 'the clinical gaze' and of all established way of organizing change.

Working at the local level, BGIA can not sanitize these critiques. Every word and every action is compromised by a context heavy with corruption, frustration and the fatigue of disaster in its thirteenth year. The position and role of activists cannot be imagined in terms of ideological purity, or even integrity. Work on the ground in

Bhopal is rife with contradiction, and at constant odds with idealized conceptions of how progressive social relations should be embodied.

The work of outside volunteers in Bhopal has taken many forms from the outset, including direct efforts to provide medical relief and job training, to organize victims, and to produce documentation which countered government data and plans for rehabilitation.<sup>9</sup> BGIA concentrated on the last of these tasks, hoping to avoid involvement in unresolvable questions over how its members should position themselves in relation to gas victims. Like many other middle-class progressives in India, founding members of BGIA were acutely aware of the difficulty of setting terms of engagement with the poor that did not mime those of colonialism. The challenge was to collaborate, without coercion, leveraging the various resources of middle-class status to speak *of* but not *for* victimized sectors of society.

This challenge was difficult enough to articulate, much less realize in social practice. BGIA chose a strategy of deferral, tabling certain strategic and ideological challenges to concentrate on immediate needs for writing. By focusing on documentation, often using the voices of particular victims to counter grand generalizations regarding health, economic security and other rehabilitation responsibilities, BGIA worked to continually interrupt official descriptions of the disaster. The goal was to create forums within which victims could speak, their local realities could be described and their position in the global order located. The challenge was to avoid representing victims in the paternalistic, patronizing ways of many journalists and elected politicians.

BGIA's strategy of deferral did not hold. In part, this was a matter of time. By the time I came to work with BGIA in early 1990, there were no other middle-class, English-speaking activist groups working on Bhopal at the local level. Rigid delineation of what BGIA would or would not take on was therefore impossible. Rehabilitation had proven disastrous so we worked to establish a clinic, structured to provide medical relief and monitoring, as well as jobs and local control. The litigation continued in ways that structurally silenced victims, so we represented victims in regular submissions to the courts and local relief officials. The work of documentation remained central, but was in no way exempt from the effects of ill-shaped social roles.

The conundrums of activism in Bhopal are daunting, on many fronts. The questions, far from answerable: How can middle-class progressives work for justice, in collaboration with those denied it? Can middle-class progressives acknowledge the gross inequalities that they both represent and work within, while relying on purposefully egalitarian styles of engagement? What styles of leadership are appropriate? How can expertise be deployed, without reproducing status hierarchies? How can dissenting opinion be respected, without paralysing collaborative work? To whom, or what, is the middle-class progressive responsible?

These questions recurred with particular force in BGIA's work with the Women's Union. Some members of BGIA felt that the Union was undemocratic beyond repair, precluding collaboration. Others, including me, felt that refusal to collaborate would be conformist, an insistence that there is only one way, one style. To abstain whenever organizational dynamics were disputed seemed to avoid the political challenge of working together, across nationalities, class, religion and even ideological difference. It seemed naive to hope to start from 'community' and to deny responsibility for constructing it.

Meanwhile, legitimate critiques of the Union's organizational dynamic proliferated, throwing into high relief how work for and within the grassroots is driven by asymmetry—at very turn, on every level, in the inequalities among languages as well as among peoples, among the disempowered as well when authority encounters its margins.

I admired most of the Union's tactics, particularly its creative engagement with public protest. The women gloried in the stories of sitting on the lawn of the Supreme Court, littering the landscape with their bodies, interrupting the proceedings of officialdom with their slogans. Or interrupting Babulal Gaur in his divali celebration. It was the Festival of Lights, so they arrived with candles, and lined the path to his door. He was the Minister of Gas Relief. By his authority, victims were allowed, or denied, admittance to hospitals, to jobs and to all future possibility. The women tell the story of their call on Gaur with an ardour for detail. They say he smiled and gave the traditional greeting, his face glowing with the purifying orange of turmeric. Like a sweet mango as it begins to rot.

The Union's strategy of street protest was an addendum to our



strategy of writing. Other aspects of the Union's work did not fit as neatly. Like the writing, the street protest worked both within and against traditional forms. So did the Union's organizational structure, but the retrofits made more noise. An internal hierarchy sustained the Union's organization, headed by Jabbar Khan, who was elected to his position by Union women. Jabbar advanced much of the Union's work, both locally and in Delhi, taking advantage of a cultural authority and right of mobility that women members did not have. His style was charismatic, and therein effective. It also was paternalistic, and sometimes autocratic.

Many outsiders accused Jabbar of acting the part of a 'film star politician'. At times, it was difficult to deny the similarities. And there were occasions when Jabbar definitely crossed the line. Recurrence is less and less likely, even if for Machiavellian reasons.

There is no question that Jabbar purposefully invoked traditional structures of authority and purposefully tapped the power of established institutions. And he did minimize the need for interruption within his own organization. But Jabbar did know that politics must be located in many places at once, requiring continual negotiation of disparate fields of reference and means of legitimacy. He knew that the whole truth of Bhopal could not be told, making us dependent on unreliable modes of description and synthetic categorization schemes. He also knew that languages, like people, are unequal, and that differentials of power must be strategically engaged rather than denied. And he knew that things are always lost in translation, reminding us that law and justice will never coincide.

Jabbar found more repose than any of us within BGIA. We were disturbed by the contradictions, almost to the point of paralysis. Jabbar skated over the interfaces, moving with pragmatic logic across different conceptual orderings of the problem at hand. Jabbar could have provided a model, had he not been dismissed for being too contingent, too tied to established structures of history and power, too much a product of the disaster he worked to ameliorate.

There is no question that collaboration between BGIA and the Women's Union has been of great practical importance. The two groups depend on each other to sustain the broader social linkages through which complete ghettoization of 'Bhopal' is held at bay. Until recently, there were not even telephones to help keep the conversation alive. Acute shortages of the tools of communication

are most visible, however, within Bhopal itself, in the everyday traffic between the homes of gas victims, the claims courts, the hospitals and the racketeering middlemen waiting on every corner.

Most members of the Women's Union can neither read nor write, and thus have trouble helping even their own families wade through the 'paper proof' of victimization. Jabbar Khan handles Hindi-language publications with great skill, but needs help with translations into English. BGIA helps offset the resource deficit, sharing language skills to offset the uneven authority which different languages carry.

BGIA's role in Bhopal is both crucial and contradictory. Members of BGIA cannot claim shared interest or even perspective with gas victims; they embody asymmetry and disjuncture. BGIA's work occurs both within and because of systematic difference with those with whom they are aligned, threatening to implode at every turn into divisions which allow rule. The challenge is to find ways of assuming responsibility for systematic difference *within* progressive initiative, turning unreasonable alliance into creatively new social forms.

### ■ RUNNING IN THE DARK

Gas victims learned of disaster in Bhopal running in the dark. They woke late in the night thinking neighbours were burning chili peppers. Soon, breathing became painfully difficult. Most fled. Many headed for Bhopal's New Market area, where the old city overlaps with offices of the modern state, new businesses and middle-class homes. Because there was no evacuation plan or even any information on wind direction, they ran into the gas, alongside its destructive currents. Many recall their logic, stressing the faith they once had that whoever had 'turned on' operations of industrial modernity could also turn them off. So they ran toward Bhopal's New Market, the hub of a modern retrofit of an old city. Agency and the possibility of change were located there; hospitals lined the route.

In many ways, my understanding of the Bhopal disaster has followed the disastrous path of gas victims, running through the dark. My work with BGIA and the Women's Union was carried out

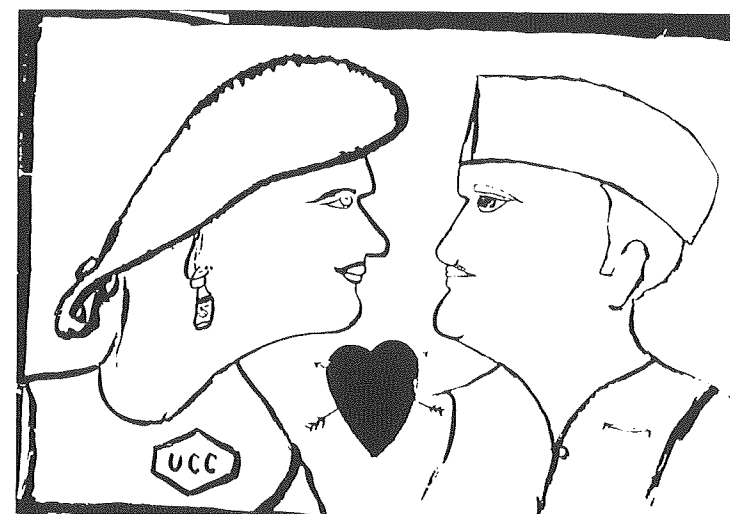
without clear direction, hopelessly bereft of sufficient information for good decision-making. Stumbling. Sickened by the stench. Witness to extraordinary displays of charity. Witness to callous abandon and aggressive pursuits of self-interest. Knowing only that we had to keep going—that obligation was out-of joint with expertise conventionally conceived, that one could never be prepared for disaster.

Like gas victims, my work in Bhopal was shaped by both too much and too little information. Like gas victims, I engaged what information I had with limited expertise and an enduring sense of potentially tragic results. Even the smallest move of politics seemed my responsibility, even if a matter of law, medicine or technology which begged for expert analysis I could not offer. Focused inquiry was deferred and I simply accepted the barrage of data that characterizes disaster at the grassroots.

Data comes from all directions but one still wants to hear more. Everything seems methodologically scrambled, contingent and at odds with any desire for functional efficacy. At first, one can only listen. The racket threatens to deafen and to mute all possibility of response. What can one say when medical data produced by different institutions so differs that comparative analysis seems all but impossible? What is the reply when one set of lab results finds no toxins in the soil or water while another set of lab results finds dichlorobenzene?<sup>10</sup> How can one find words when rehabilitation schemes turn into the Bhopal Beautification Plan, requiring the forced relocation of slum dwellers, who are said to pose threats to public health? All one hears sounds like noise, discordant sound lacking any syntax, disturbances that interfere with the reception of signals and useful information.

Advocacy became a way of knowing, a prosthetics for making sense of a world asphyxiated with meaning. Double-binds proliferated. I had to learn languages of law and bureaucracy, while learning how badly these languages represent everyday life. I had to learn to speak in terms of environmentalism, while learning how badly environmentalism represents the Third World poor. I had to learn the many truths of theoretical critiques of representation, on the ground—while producing one representation of Bhopal after another.

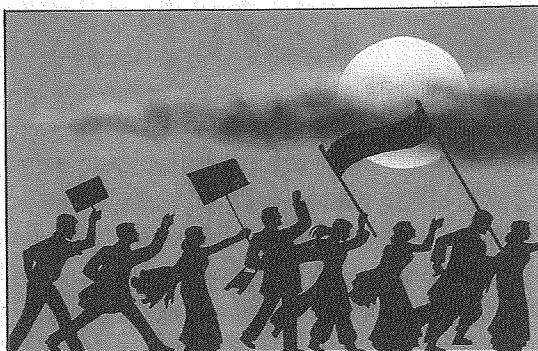
My role as advocate was not unlike that of a translator, who constantly traffics between different languages and narrative forms.



**'Affairs of State', a drawing by T. R. Chouhan, former worker in Union Carbide's Bhopal plant and author of *Bhopal: The Inside Story*. In Chouhan's account, the tragedy of Bhopal is partly a result of collusion between the Government of India (shown here in a Nehru hat) and Union Carbide (wearing Eveready batteries as earrings; In 1984, over 50% of the revenues of Union Carbide India came from this product.) Chouhan's claim that Union Carbide and the Government of India were partners in crime is echoed by songs sung by victims during public protests: 'What did Carbide do? It murdered thousands of people. What did the government do? It aided the murderers'.**

My job was to create pathways, channels along which otherwise marginalized perspectives could move. And there was not just one place they needed to go. If directed toward the Supreme Court, calculated logic was the rule, substantiated with hard figures. If directed toward journalists, testimonial was sometimes appropriate, without reduction to cause, effect and proof. To translate effectively, I had to constantly move between different orderings of meaning, recognizing that the organizing principles appropriate for one domain are incongruent with those appropriate for other domains.

Often, I worked alongside destructive currents, relying on the institutions and concepts of modernity even while critiquing them. Like gas victims, I had to hope that whatever had turned on the disaster, could also help turn it off. Irresolvable contradiction became matter of fact; proficiency depended on an ability to work within constraint, within paradox, within disaster.

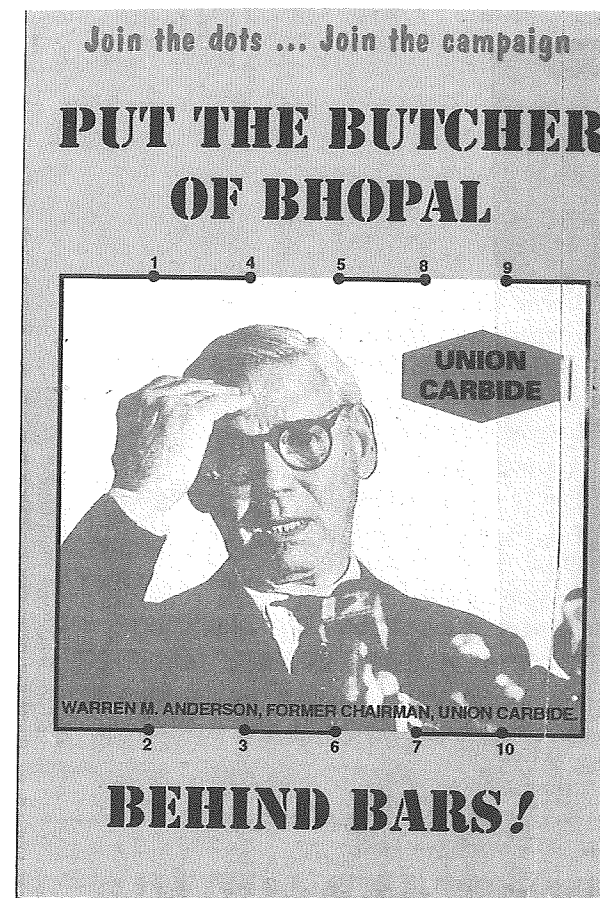


BHOPAL. THE SUFFERING CONTINUES. SO DOES THE STRUGGLE.

A commemoration also produced by the Bhopal Gas Affected Working Women's Union and the BGIA. The statue in the postcard is of a woman running with her children. It stands just opposite the gates of the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, in the residential colony of J. P. Nagar. The base of the statue is engraved. 'NO HIROSHIMA. NO BHOPAL. WE WANT TO LIVE.' The statue was made by Ruth Waterman, with Sanjay Mitra and the Nagarik Rahat Aur Punarvas Committee.

□ NOTES

1. In these times, history was often referred to as a clean-up prosthetic, as a heuristic for decontamination, as a tool of exorcism. Note Derrida, responding to Alan Bloom's enthusiasm for so-called new world order: "What cynicism of good conscience, what manic disavowal could cause someone to write, if not believe, that 'everything that stood in the way of the reciprocal recognition of human



This postcard, also produced by the Women's Union and BGIA, calls for the extradition of Warren Anderson to India, where he would face criminal charges. Anderson was CEO of Union Carbide in December 1984. The reverse side is printed with a message to the Prime Minister of India, reminding him that if actions aren't taken to hold Anderson accountable for his crimes against humanity, 'corporations and their officials will be encouraged to inflict more Bhopals in India and the rest of the world'.

dignity, always and everywhere, has been refuted and buried by history'." (*Specters of Marx*, p. 78)

2. The *Wall Street Journal's* description of Black Monday is telling: "But if history echoed, it didn't repeat. The world collapse that followed the 1929 crash did not recur. The economy groaned but kept growing. And by 1989 the market was passing the records of 1987". And note how meaning was extracted from the fall of the Berlin Wall: "With Lenin and Marx little more than icons on the Kremlin wall, the US heads into a new era, hoping to demonstrate again that free

markets, free institutions and free workers are the answer to future prosperity" (Morris *et al.*, 1990, pp. 210, 216).

3. For a very thoughtful description of working as a sociologist within the anti-war movement, recollected with the insights of feminism, see Barrie Thorne's 'Political activist as participant observer' (Thorne, 1983). Thorne describes the epistemological conflict she confronted as she became aware that "the movement's ways of defining and interpreting experience ran counter to the more detached and routinizing perspectives I maintained as a sociological observer" (p. 225). This does not lead Thorne to argue for a simple separation of politics and research: "Comparing my experiences in the Resistance and in the feminist movement, I realized that the sociological imagination—the insight that can come from detachment, comparison and systematic analysis—should be distinguished from other components of the research role. Sociological understanding and information can be organized in various ways, including as part of movements for social change. For example, I believe my contributions to discussions of strategies and tactics in the Resistance (e.g. in our long debates about the efficacy of draft card turn-ins and draft counseling) were strengthened by my ability to think sociologically, and by the systematic observations I had made of the movement over time. However, putting these insights into dissertation and journal articles, geared for a different audience, was less useful for the movement". Thorne's academic publications have, however, been useful for my movement work, suggesting, perhaps, that while the political relevance of scholarly accounts may be spatially and temporally deferred, it does materialize.

4. My understanding of how ethnicity can become a resource if allowed to operate across multiple fields of reference has been greatly influenced by the teaching of Michael Fischer. See Fischer (1986).

5. Throughout my fieldwork in India, I was particularly influenced by the work of Gayatri Spivak. Her identification as a 'feminist, Marxist, deconstructivist literary critic' appealed to my concern with many different approaches to politics and scholarship, all of which seemed to demand both commitment and critique. See Spivak (1987) for lessons on the work of margins, and in reading 'against the grain'.

6. Operation Faith was a government-managed effort to process all methyl isocyanate remaining in the Bhopal plant following the gas leak on 3 December. Many recognize Operation Faith as an attempt by the Indian government to re-secure its own authority, both scientific and political. Despite repeated assurance that Operation Faith would be an exercise in complete control, at least 300,000 Bhopalis fled the city.

7. Even the stability of the lower figure has wavered, with some commentators insisting that 225,000 lived in gas-affected areas while others have used a figure of 250,000. For one articulation of the critique described here (which uses the figure of 225,000) see Visvanathan with Kothari (1985), p. 52. Claude Alvares' phrasing of his critique suggests later destabilization of the 600,000 figure: "Though the affected population at that time was 250,000, as many as 700,000 fresh ration cards were liberally distributed and a sum of Rs. 2 crore was spent every month

in this way on this scheme". Alvares also reports that exchange rates in 1984 were approximately Rs 14 to US\$1 (Alvares, 1994, p. 116). Paul Shrivastava reports on this period as follows: "In the first six months after the accident, the government distributed about \$8 million in free food, for the most part grain and rice, to both affected and unaffected areas. By October 1985, this total had increased to \$13 million, but the food distribution ceased by the end of the year". Shrivastava's footnotes indicate that his source for these figures was an article published in the *Madhya Pradesh Chronicle* on 28 December 1985, entitled 'Call to ascertain total casualties'. See Shrivastava (1987, p. 93, f9/p. 156).

8. See Shrivastava (1987, p. 94), where he also states that as of a year following the gas leak, 85% of the people living in the 36 wards officially identified as gas-affected had not received any financial assistance.

9. An extremely useful account of the early days of activism in Bhopal is Ravi Rajan's 'Rehabilitation and voluntarism in Bhopal' (Rajan, 1988). Rajan went to Bhopal to report on the first anniversary of the disaster and stayed for nine months to work with BGIA and other voluntary organizations. He now has a Ph.D. and writes about colonialism and environmental degradation in the Third World. For a brief but thorough overview of the first ten years of struggle to respond to the Bhopal disaster, see Claude Alvares' afterword to *Bhopal: The Inside Story*, by T.R. Chouhan, a former worker in Union Carbide's Bhopal plant. Chouhan's book tells the history of negligence in the Bhopal plant in the years preceding the 1984 gas leak, responding directly to company charges that the disaster was caused by worker sabotage. The afterword by Alvares covers each year following the gas leak, focusing on the effects various developments had on victims, and how victims responded. A second afterword by Indira Jaising also provides a brief but thorough review of the years leading to the tenth anniversary, focusing on the 'legal let-down'. The literature on the Bhopal disaster is now quite broad; these few references directly expand upon some of the issues I explore here.

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