Union Carbide, may God forgive you

You have known for more than ten years that your derelict factory in Bhopal is contaminated with lethal chemicals, and that there was a threat to the ground water, and thus to our drinking wells.

You did not warn us. We found out from your own secret documents after a court in New York last month ordered you to hand them over.

Thanks to your gases, our people are ravaged by illness, but for years we've puzzled why people who weren't in Bhopal when your factory blew up are also getting ill with symptoms just like those of the gas survivors. You knew, and didn't tell us.

What kind of people are you, to keep quiet when you must have known that the poisons leaking into the groundwater could cause cancers and birth defects among the very people whose families your gases killed eighteen years ago?

Photo: Raghu Rai

When you built your factory, you promised us it was for good. You told us – those of us who lived in the shadow of your steel towers and could smell their stench – 'We are making *kheti ki dawai*, medicine for the fields'.

You never said you were making poisons.

It's eighteen years since that night, the night no one who survived it will ever forget.

You did not wake with your eyes streaming, to tell your crying, innocent children, 'Go back to sleep darling, it's only someone burning chilis.'

You weren't there when it did not stop and our lungs caught fire, as if someone had thrust live coals down our throats. You weren't with us when we fled from our houses into the yelling and screams and confusion, the cows running too and trampling us in their terror. Where were you when we began falling, thousands of us, to lie like rag bundles, like the sacks of poison you used to employ our men to stack with bare hands in your factory?

Only on that night did we learn the truth about that factory of yours. It was manufacturing death. The deaths you'd planned were those of insects, but you killed us instead.

Was there much difference, to you? We saw you, coming from Shamla Hills in your big cars, looking neither left nor right as the gates of your factory opened and the guards saluted. You did not see us, our houses, our lanes, shops, strings of washing, signs for *Ganesh Beedis* and S*halimar Dry Cleaning*. For you we didn't really exist.

You certainly never treated us as people, because you wouldn't tell our doctors what had leaked or how to treat it. You said these were 'trade secrets'.

You were interested, but not in us. You sent a man to Bhopal to question our doctors. We know all about him now, but for years he was a sinister legend. He'd worked with chemical weapons, hadn't he? – testing them on animals and people too. He was interested in the effects of cyanide. That's why he came. Not to help us, but to watch us die and make notes about how long it took.

Your man didn't stay to see what overtook us in the months that followed, nausea, breathlessness, headaches, giddiness, aches that seemed to bend our bones. He left, but these things didn't. As months became years, you showed no further interest in us – in our cancers, the epidemic of menstrual problems, the terrifying births – none of these things did you ever enquire about. You never thought of us again.

PRESENCE OF TOXIC INGREDIENTS IN SOIL/WATER SAMPLES INSIDE PLANT PREMISES

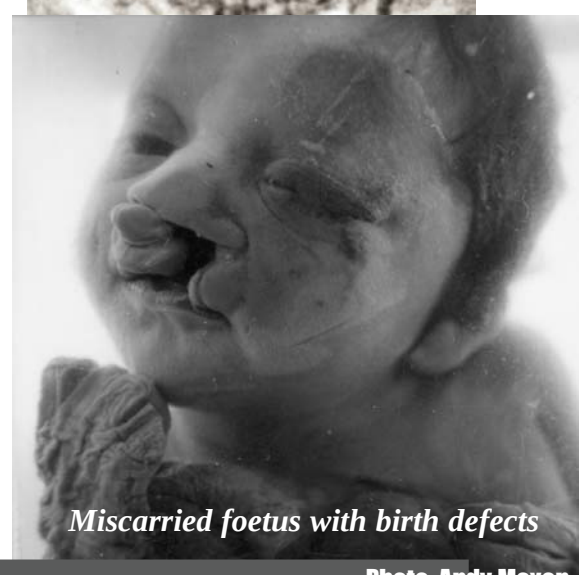
The matter has assumed significant importance in view of recent reports in local and national news papers. The seriousness of the issue needs no elaboration. It is earnestly suggested that the subject be given due consideration and studies initiated without further delay. If the situation so requires, the work may be carried out primarily for our own understanding of the situation, in the first phase. In the following paragraphs a summary of preliminary work carried out in 1989 is described.

1. Analysis of samples drawn by plant personnel in June-July 1989.

Samples drawn in June-July '89 from land-fill areas and effluent treatment pits inside the plant were sent to R and D. They consisted of nine soil/solid samples and eight liquid samples. The solid samples had organic contamination varying from 10% to 100% and contained known ingredients like naphthol and naphthalene in substantial quantities.

Majority of the liquid samples contained naphthol and/or Sevin in quantities far more than permitted by ISI for onland disposal. All samples caused 100% mortality to fish in toxicity assessment studies and were to be diluted several fold to render them suitable for survival of fish.

Secret Carbide document proves the company knew its dead factory was endangering groundwater with lethal toxins. It warned nobody.



Miscarried foetus with birth defects

Photo: Andy Moxon

Torture me

THE SURVIVORS' POEM

aim a blowtorch at my eyes
pour acid down my throat
strip the tissue from my lungs
drown me in my own blood
choke my baby to death in front of me,
force me to watch her struggles as she dies – cripple my children
let pain be their daily and their only playmate – spare me nothing
ruin my health so I can no longer work or feed my family –
watch us starve –
see my children drinking water at night to fill their hungry bellies
poison our drinking water
never warn us of the danger
cause monsters to be born among us
make us curse God
stunt our living children's growth
say it's nothing to do with you
don't ever say sorry
for eighteen years ignore our cries
teach me that my rage is as useless as my tears – prove to me beyond all doubt that there is no justice in the world
you are a wealthy american corporation
and I am a gas victim of bhopal

HAR NAARI KI YAHI LADAAI, JHADOO MARO DOW KO!

You tried your best to avoid paying compensation. Your gases injured half a million people in our city and your lawyers threatened to cross-examine every one of them. They asked the court to allow one day per witness. It would have taken 1,500 years.

Isn't this why the Supreme Court settled with you, so we would at least get something before all of us were dead? You ended up paying a pittance. Over eighteen years it works out at enough to buy one cup of tea per day. It doesn't even buy aspirin.

Meanwhile we were still dying. How we died! To date, you have achieved at least 20,000 victims.

You didn't just take our loved ones. You took our livings. Most of us worked very hard – pulling loads, carrying things – long hours on meagre diets. We were among the poorest people on earth, you were among the richest, but you turned us into beggars and then turned your back on us.

You locked the gates of your factory and left. But the stink still hangs there, eighteen years later. You never bothered to clean it up. We know, you see, because we've been in. We've gone through the gaps in the wall to stop our children playing among the heaps of brown rocks that have tumbled from rotting tanks. They're not rocks, they're lumps of poison.

You've never been back – you didn't come even when our court ordered you to appear. You were Americans, you said. Indian courts had no powers over you. So you don't know that in your factory, no birds sing. This isn't magic. There's nothing for the birds to eat. The ground is poisoned. In many places, drops of mercury lie gleaming on the ground. In your solar evaporation ponds are thousands of tons of toxic sludge. When the rains turned them into lakes, children used to splash in them and cows drank there. No more. Since we got hold of your secret papers, we know you filled the ponds with napthol and napthalene, di- and tri-chlorobenzenes, monomethylamine and trichloroethane.

We know that drinking from the wells you contaminated can cause cancers, liver damage and birth defects.

If it seems surprising that people who never went to school have taught themselves chemistry and medicine, the reason is that we learned a long time ago to expect nothing from the giant US corporation that killed our families, ruined our lives and is now hiding like a toxic Jonah inside Dow Chemical's whale. *(See www.bhopal.net)* We had to help ourselves, so we started our own clinic, where gas-affected people are treated free. It is called Sambhavna –'possibility' – and is run for survivors by survivors – most of our staff are gas-affected. Nobody is turned away. The poorest are welcomed with dignity. We offer them modern medicine along with traditional ayurveda. We also pioneered the use of yoga breathing and massage for lung patients. *(See www.bhopal.org)*

This year Sambhavna won the Margaret Mead award, which is given to small groups of people who make a real difference in the world. That prize also belongs to the readers of this newspaper.

Guardian readers gave the money to start Sambhavna and have kept it running for six years. Thank you, God bless your good hearts.

Our need this year is urgent as ever. The people we treat cannot be cured, but their suffering can be eased. Please be as generous as you were last year. We value your support as much as your donation. There may be no justice in this world, but there are a lot of good people. That alone keeps us alive.

You can FREEFONE 0800 316 5577 NOW to make a credit card donation. Or use the donation form below.

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Account No 61752312, NatWest Bank, Brixton Branch (60-03-36)
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Bhopal Medical Appeal

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