



Photo by Colin Toogood, Bhopal Medical Appeal

Two Decades After World's Worst Industrial Disaster, Bhopal Still Weeps

By Beth Duff-Brown

BHOPAL, India (AP) – The fresh graffiti resembles that of all young lovers: "Shanti & Dewesh" enclosed in a heart, traced in chalk on the grim walls of the abandoned warehouse.

Perhaps they found sneaking into the haunted grounds of Union Carbide _ where the air is an earthy mix of cow dung, tongue-tingling chemicals and rusted metal _ a dare to their undying love, or a defiant shrug against the sorrow that has enveloped Bhopal for 20 years.

It was five minutes past midnight on Dec. 3, 1984, when 40 tons of poisonous gas burst from a storage tank at the pesticide plant. Silently, it seeped out over this former Muslim principality in the heart of India, a royal city once revered for its art and poetry.

Within minutes, tens of thousands would be clawing at their throats and putting palms to their frothing mouths and bleeding eyes, stumbling through the dark alleyways, crying for help.

"We all started running toward the train station," recalls Suman Kushawa, 8 years old at the time. She got separated from her mother, father and three brothers as they fled. "They all died on the

way," whispers the orphan, today a mother of two, who still cries for her parents and can barely speak of that night.

Thousands collapsed on the roads, their lungs burning as if rubbed raw with chilies. Some choked on their own vomit. Others were trampled by cows; run over by trucks.

Many simply prayed: "Allah, give me death."

Thousands did die, though just how many has never been clear.

Those who survived were condemned to a life of gruesome memories, medical ordeals and a fight for justice many believe has been denied by U.S. chemical giants.

As the 20th anniversary of the tragedy approaches, survivors are gaining ground in their demand for financial and environmental compensation. But other Bhopalis want to put the tragedy behind them, shed their city's anguished image and reinvent Bhopal as another of India's booming business hubs.

"There's no sense in repeating our history over and over. We just need to catch up with the pace of the world," said Jagjeet Singh, who works at an outsourcing center in Bhopal, transcribing dictation from American doctors via the Internet. "If we stay stuck on that one issue, we'll never make any progress.

The capital of Madhya Pradesh state, Bhopal is a microcosm of India today. Many of the city's 1 million residents live in slums and earn less than a dollar a day, while middle-class Indians race headlong into a 21st century of unprecedented opportunity.

"Everything you see in India is contained in the Bhopal saga. Essentially, it's the story of survival against all odds," said Satinath Sarangi, director of the Sambhavna Trust Clinic, which offers free health care for gas victims.

The Bhopal gas leak was the world's worst industrial disaster. U.S. chemical company Union Carbide Corp. insists the tragedy was due to sabotage by a disgruntled employee and not shoddy safety standards or faulty plant design, as claimed by many activists.

"The plant produced pesticides for use in India to help the country's agricultural sector increase its productivity and contribute more significantly to meeting the food needs of one of the world's most heavily populated regions," Union Carbide says on its Website.

Union Carbide – based in Danbury, Conn., and bought by Dow Chemical Co. of Midland, Mich., in 2001 – claims that 3,800 people were killed. Indian officials say 10,000 to 12,000 people were killed, while Bhopal activists and health workers say more than 20,000 people have died over the years due to gas-related illnesses, such as lung cancer, kidney failure and liver disease.

Indian officials estimate that nearly 600,000 more have become ill or had babies born with congenital defects over the last 20 years.

The pea-green control room at the deserted Union Carbide plant, now managed by the state government, is a testament to neglect. Plump sacks of chemicals still sit in the warehouse. Those silent leftovers have become screaming ironies.

"Safety is Everybody's Business," reads a sticker on the metal panels of the control room, where rusting dials once measured the pressure and output of chemical storage tanks.

Union Carbide, in a statement sent to The Associated Press, said it spent more than \$2 million to clean up the plant from 1985 to 1994, when it sold its stake in Union Carbide India Ltd. (UCIL) and the local company was then renamed as Eveready Industries.

"The single most important remediation activity was completed in 1985 by UCIL – the transformation and removal of tens of thousands of pounds of methyl isocyanate (MIC) from the plant," Tom Sprick, a Union Carbide spokesman, said in the statement.

The state government took over legal responsibility of the site in 1998, but it has done little to remove the debris and sacks of chemicals. Greenpeace estimates it would cost at least \$30 million to clean up the plant and the ground water and soil that it claims are laced with carcinogens.

Union Carbide says state studies indicated in 1998 that the ground water around the plant was free of toxins and that any water contamination was due to improper drainage and other pollution, not Union Carbide chemicals.

A Bhopal hospital for gas victims, funded in part by a trust Union Carbide created, believes 500,000 people still suffer from gas-related illnesses and have traces of the toxic methyl isocyanate gas in their bloodstreams.

Women's menstrual cycles are irregular and some children are still born with deformities or congenital diseases. According to a study published last year in the Journal of the American Medical Association, some boys born to those women have smaller heads.

Adil Bee, born seven years after the disaster, stopped growing after his third birthday. His neck never quite took form. His gnarled feet are turned inward, forcing him to scoot around on his knees. Thirteen-year-old Adil cannot speak; his mother can only cry when asked how long he is expected to live.

"The doctors told me not to expect anything from him," said Raisa Bee, 45, who received 25,000 Rupees (\$43) for Adil's medical care.

Adil's aunt, Rashida Bee, is a Bhopal activist. She and neighbor Champa Devi Shukla received the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, awarded earlier this year for their dogged pursuit of Union Carbide. For years, they've been organizing protests and demanding UC and Dow be held accountable for the cleanup.

Though illiterate and uneducated – like many of the Muslim women on the poor side of the ancient lakes that dot Bhopal – she says God called her to action.

"God ordered all of us to do it for society," said Bee, 48, who has traveled worldwide to speak about the tragedy. "We'll get Dow Chemical on their hands and knees, if necessary, to clean it up."

Dow maintains the case was resolved in 1989, when Union Carbide settled with the Indian government for \$470 million. Though the 1989 deal dropped all charges against the company and then-chairman Warren Anderson, the Indian Supreme Court reinstated manslaughter charges against him in 1991.

In July, the U.S. State Department rejected India's extradition request on technical grounds. Union Carbide reasoned that, with compounded interest over 20 years, the settlement would eventually provide some \$1 billion in compensation. India's Supreme Court last month ordered the final compensation be given to 572,000 affected Bhopalis by the end of the year.

"UC accepted moral responsibility for the tragedy immediately after it occurred," said Sprick, the company spokesman. "We continue to hope that the latest directive by the Indian Supreme Court, to disburse the remaining settlement funds, will provide badly needed money for relief and support."

Only part of the \$470 million has been disbursed to the victims as bureaucrats bicker over who is due and exactly how much. The remainder, held at the Central Bank, has grown to about \$330 million over the years.

Bhopal activists argue the compensation should now be quadrupled, since the Supreme Court acknowledged that the number of people affected by the gas leak _ from those who have finally proven they lost relatives, to those who have since become ill or had babies born with congenital defects _ has gone from 105,000 to nearly 600,000 in 20 years.

Activists argue that because Dow Chemical took over Union Carbide's liabilities and its assets, it should also assume its damages. Dow, which recently posted quarterly sales of \$10 billion, maintains the responsibility rests with the Madhya Pradesh government.

While the state has provided some jobs and housing, the plant has been ignored. "India's been trying very hard to forget about Bhopal," said Vinuta Gopal, a toxics specialist for Greenpeace India. "They're really scared that the push for corporate accountability would scare off other multinationals."

Smita Sooraj, 25, works alongside Singh at Bhilwara Scribe, an outsourcing center whose motto is "Proud to be Indian; Privileged to be Global."

Sooraj is among many Bhopalis who want to close the book on the tragedy.

"The Bhopalis are not as poor as you think," she said, taking a break from transcribing medical records. "And you can find people from all over India _ each caste, every religion, so many customs and cultures. We're all working united, to build this beautiful city up again."

Rajendra Kothari, state director of the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which represents dozens of chambers of commerce in northern India, insists Bhopal is poised for resurrection with a pool of skilled workers. He said the continued demands by the victims, though valid, have held them back.

Bhopal is "one of the growing, vibrant cities of India," Kothari said, but it is "is only known for tragedy."

Kothari said Bhopal business leaders are pragmatists and don't expect anything more from Union Carbide. But they do wonder why Washington has not established some industries in the city blemished by an American company.

"Such a large accident does bear the moral responsibility of the U.S. government," he said, "and a healthy economics always is a great healing touch."

Bhopal exports about 35 billion rupees (\$761 million) in manufacturing goods yearly, Kothari said, but a city of its size should be producing three times that much.

"If Union Carbide had not happened," he said, "Bhopal would have grown much faster."

But Union Carbide did happen, and 21-year-old Sanjay Verma will never forget. He lost his parents, three brothers and two sisters, leaving his older brother and sister to be reared in an orphanage. His brother, 36-year-old Sunil, has tried to kill himself three times. Verma has managed to move ahead, perhaps because he has no memory of the ghastly night.

Verma excelled in school, earning a university scholarship. He's now studying commerce, hoping to become a chartered accountant. "I feel an obligation to succeed, for my brother and sister, who played the role of my parents at the time," said Verma, who today lives in what's known as Widows Colony, a grim, subsidized housing block for Bhopal gas victims not far from the plant.

Verma, with a hip haircut, jeans and T-shirt, says he is like all other Indian youth, planning a better life for himself and the next generation. He is not waiting for another handout. But he also cannot escape his destiny, forced on him one night, before he had learned to walk.

Greenpeace flew him and another Bhopal gas orphan to Paris in September to crash a fashion show by Dow Chemical _ launching its new fiber, XLA _ and unfurl a banner to remind the world that 20 years later, Bhopal gas victims will not be silenced.

"We are still fighting for justice," Verma said. "And we will fight until we get it."