

REMEMBER BHOPAL



THE WORLD'S WORST INDUSTRIAL DISASTER?

The Bhopal gas tragedy is recognized globally as the world's worst industrial disaster, and yet it is given very little attention compared to other industrial accidents such as Chernobyl, or disasters such as the 9/11 destruction of the world trade center New York. And it is not just abroad that the legacy of Bhopal is neglected. In fact, while cities like San Francisco, California and Seattle, Washington have officially commemorated the disaster, the Indian government has yet to appropriately recognize the significance of the tragedy.

Because the Bhopal tragedy affected mostly the poor, the Union Carbide Corporation and its Indian subsidiaries have largely succeeded in marginalizing the story of the disaster that sullied their reputation. The Bhopal story has been effectively reduced to a footnote in engineering textbooks, as a one-time disaster successfully managed rather than an egregious and continuing one. This does an injustice to both the memory of those who have died and to the struggle of those who continue to survive.

MEMORIAL

No memorial has been built for the survivors. An independent artist, working with survivors, created a modest statute in front of the Union Carbide factory in 1985. But the state has never instituted a day of memory nor any type of memorial.

Now the State government is proposing to fund a 100 crore memorial but is entirely excluding gas victims from the process. Although a memorial is crucial, the best memorial would be to take care of the needs of the gas victims -- both their basic needs like clean water and medical care, and their human needs of memorializing and publicly acknowledging their suffering. "The government has no moral right to construct a memorial when it is not even able to meet the medical and other needs of the gas victims," says Satinath Sarangi of the Bhopal Group for Information and Action, an NGO working among gas victims. Any memorial must do all of the above simultaneously, with the guidance and involvement of survivor's groups.

To "remember Bhopal" today means not just collecting and understanding information about the disaster and it's aftermath, but also critiquing it, teaching it, and using it in creative ways.



EDUCATION – THE LESSONS OF BHOPAL

Even in the crucial matter of learning from and about this national tragedy, India lags behind. Many university curriculum in other countries do a better job than most Indian universities do in presenting the facts about Bhopal and its long and difficult aftermath. For example, the Bhopal Memory Project at Bard College in the United States is dedicated entirely to the disaster (www.bard.edu/bhopal). Indian universities' curricular inclusion of the Bhopal story is negligible in comparison to that of foreign

counterparts, and most efforts at memorializing the disaster have been developed only to generate tourism and business, rather than as genuine monuments to the suffering endured by the Bhopal survivors, or a promise to avoid more disasters like Bhopal.



A MUSEUM BY SURVIVORS

In this vein, a small museum was opened only months ago in Bhopal by the survivors. The museum is jointly run by a coalition of survivors' organizations. Funded by donations from two survivors, Rashida Bi and Champa Devi, who won the 2004 Goldman Prize for environmental advocacy, this small effort aims primarily to bring together the objects that remind the Bhopal survivors of their lost loved ones. The efforts of the survivors to commemorate the victims must be supported by the government of India, and the museum must be integrated and developed into a larger, survivor-influenced educational effort.

RESPONSIBILITY

The Bhopal disaster affected 500,000 people locally, but it has ramifications for communities around the world, and particularly in India. It is the responsibility of a democratic government like India's to protect its people from such harm and injustice. Such protection necessarily involves educating its people about what happened and about what can be done to prevent it from ever happening again.

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

1. A declaration must be made by the prime minister, announcing India's commitment to rehabilitating Bhopal, and making the 3rd of December a day of memory and commemoration for the disaster
2. The central government and the Minister of Chemicals must allocate funding for a memorial for the gas disaster, but must respect the moral authority of survivors in its planning and involve survivor organizations at every stage of planning and execution.
3. Memorializing the disaster must be concurrent with rehabilitating Bhopal and prioritizing the health of the survivors.
4. Design educational curricula to include the true and full story of the gas disaster and its aftermath.



WE DEMAND that Bhopal is meaningfully remembered; that the government respect the moral authority of survivors and include representatives of survivors' organizations in the creation of a memorial to the disaster; that December 3rd is declared a National Day of Mourning for Victims of Industrial Disasters and Pollution; and that the Bhopal disaster and its aftermath is guaranteed prominent inclusion in school and college curricula.

**This padyatra is our march for justice and dignity. We shall struggle to our last breath.
21 years is enough!**

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