

BHOPAL - A Testimony To The Impact of Technological Disasters

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Bhopal, a household name today, symbolises technological disasters. The world's worst industrial accident occurred here in December 1984. A massive leakage of toxic gases from a pesticide plant affected over 5,00,000 people. Unaware of the hazard potential of the 'neighbourhood' plant, and of precautions to be taken in the event of an accident, the innocent paid dearly with their lives and health. Government estimates 1,700 dead in the early phase. Unofficial estimates are higher. As always, the poor were worst affected.

Eight years later, death rates are still higher among the exposed. Community based, hospital and laboratory studies indicate that sickness and death rates will continue to be high among victims, as compared to the unexposed. Immune and respiratory systems have been damaged, leading to progressive pathology in different parts of the body. People experience repeated infections and a variety of worsening symptoms.

About 2,00,000 are estimated to suffer 'moderate' illness (if suffering can be quantified!), of which 60 - 80,000 are seriously affected. Additionally, 3,00,000 have mild symptoms. Women experience larger number of abortions and gynaecological problems. Childrens' lives have changed drastically with infections, respiratory problems, dimness of vision and difficulty to concentrate affecting their education and future. Large numbers of all ages suffer from anxiety, fears, nightmares, grief reactions from a sense of hopelessness. Studies reveal chromosomal abnormalities. The working and earning capacity of people has been badly affected. Several victims say that those who died were the luckier ones.

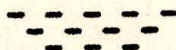
The response of all concerned has been inadequate in the face of this enormous human suffering. The multinational has maintained a secrecy regarding the nature of gases, hampering rational treatment. After prolonged litigation, the compensation agreed to by the company and the

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Industrial and environmental hazards were considered by the Tribunal, not as unavoidable, but as an organised violation of the fundamental rights of humanity to life, health and access to justice. The Tribunal as well as other groups have underscored the right to information and the need for independent medical assessment of injuries resulting from industrial hazards. Peoples organisations, movements and their networks are of crucial importance. So too the need for persistent efforts towards justice that may take even decades. Other suggestions included peoples' sanctions against offending parties, through boycott of consumer products, disinvestment etc.

While there is yet a long road ahead in the cause of justice for the victims of Bhopal, the lessons that have been paid for dearly, need to be learnt and remembered. Bhopal is not just a freak accident, but is representative of many less dramatic instances of industrial hazards. That this is a cause of serious ill-health needs wider recognition and action to be evolved at local, national and international levels.



References

1. Permanent Peoples Tribunal, 1992

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