

Bhopal, two years later

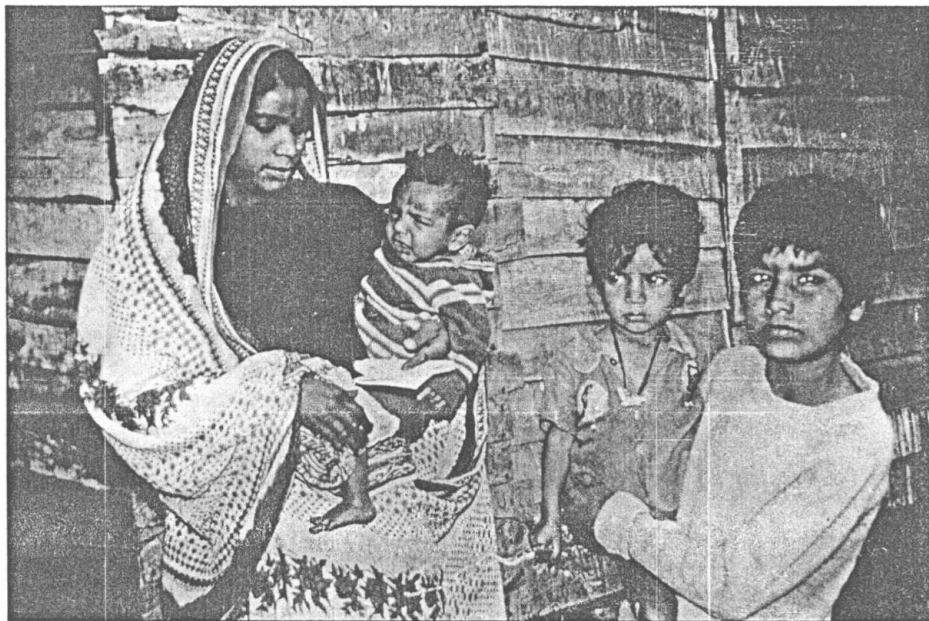
by Sundeep Waslekar

In December 1984, Angoori Bai was living with her family by the roadside in one of the shantytowns surrounding the Union Carbide plant at Bhopal. Her husband, Premchand, was a labourer and the family's sole wage-earner. On the night of the disaster, he was unable to run fast enough to flee the toxic gas; he died on this very night. Now Angoori Bai must face the world and feed her three children. Her only precious possession is a piece of green paper — Premchand's death certificate — which hopefully will earn her some government assistance.

Angoori Bai's 11-year-old son, Raju, and other children in his neighborhood have lately taken to playing a strange new game. One child plays father, another mother, another son, or daughter. One of the children shrieks "Gas as gayee hai" ("The dangerous gas has appeared"). They all leap up, reel about, choke and fall dead.

The story of this family shows how one industrial accident changed the lives of more than 250,000 people in Bhopal. The young survivors have come to terms with fear and have even made a place for it in their games. That is the way of children. But for their parents, the accident has meant, if not death, then unemployment, squatting, physical deprivation and many questions about their future for which there seem to be no easy answers.

Moolchand, who also lived in Bhopal, woke up on the night of the disaster to find his room full of irritating gas fumes. Like thousands of others, he ran to save his life. And he survived — but just. The poisonous gas had ravaged his



Angoori Bai and her 3 children. (Photo: Simantini Dhuru)

body, leaving him unable to work. His small business of scrap-trading suffered. He could not breathe nor eat nor even see properly. He went to government clinics and private doctors. His savings vanished and his wife's jewelry had to be sold. But his condition did not improve. He finally died in July 1986 at the Hamidia hospital.

Long-term impact

"The worst is over", victims were told in the week after the tragedy. This might have been so for a few officials and experts, but not for the people. For them the worst was yet to be — they still had to cope with drastic financial and physical consequences. Scientists and doctors state that at least 10,000 people have irreversible lung damage, for which there is no known medical treatment. Most of these people with reduced lung capacities cannot go back to their original jobs. Many are suffering from persistent breathlessness, muscle

fatigue and pain, loss of memory — rendering them unable to work and hence, in some cases, homeless.

Questions, questions, but no answers. Scientists, doctors, officials do not know the long-term effects of methyl isocyanate, the toxic gas released in the disaster. Nobody knows what exactly will happen to future generations.

Humanitarian aid

A number of humanitarian assistance agencies have come forward to rehabilitate the children and adults who survived the tragedy. Suraksha is one of the best-known. It involves gas-affected children in painting, music, storytelling, poetry and drama. It aims at normalizing children's attitude towards life.

The Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind has opened an eye hospital, while the Indian Red Cross and the Roman Catholic

Church have launched medical centres. The Rama Krishna Mission, a Hindu religious foundation, runs a mobile dispensary. Tender School Program and Project World Vision, two foreign-funded NGOs, are working in child education. Women's organizations are also in the forefront. The Self-Employed Women's Association administers a vocational training program for women. So do Mahila Chetna Manch and the local Lions Club.

Disaster prevention

"But along with the rehabilitation efforts, we must also start working for preventing such industrial disasters", says Sagar Dhara, industrial safety expert who has

devoted himself to relief work in Bhopal. Mr. Dhara says: "It is a question of upgrading industrial safety standards in India, as in other developing countries, and educating the public about these matters".

There are many reasons why in a developing country industrial safety standards may be below those in industrialized countries.

Mrs. A. Tcheknavorian-Asenbauer, head of Chemical Industries Branch at UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organization), recently wrote: "Inadequate appreciation at the design stage of the different nature of local conditions often leads to plants in the Third

World being significantly less safe than corresponding units located in the parent companies' own countries". To control accidents, she prescribes the strengthening of proper safety regulations, inspection, and workers' education, as well as the building-up of local technical expertise.

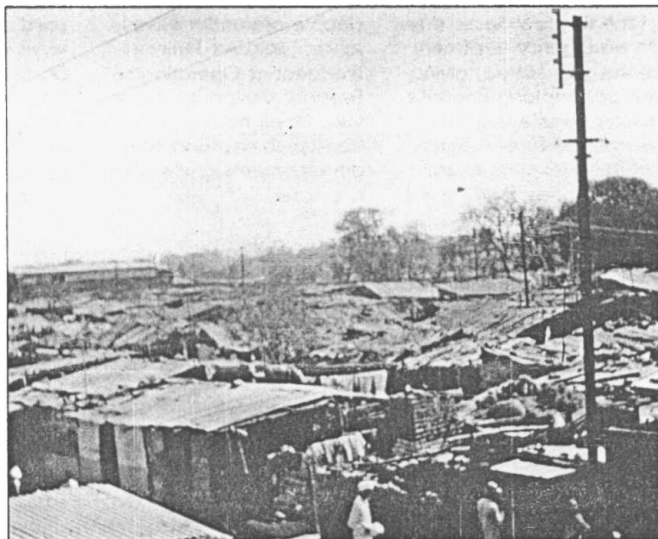
Some questions must be answered... Are safety measures alone capable of averting industrial disasters? Or do we need to address some fundamental issues? Are industrialized countries immune from the problems of industrial accidents? Or do all countries, developed and developing, need to review some dangerous imperfections in their development strategies?

Bhopal, a night in December

Bhopal, capital of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, used to be a peaceful city. It knew this peace until the night of December 2-3, 1984, when a mysterious and deadly fog descended upon the city.

After escaping from a pesticide factory at one o'clock in the morning, this cloud of death began to wind its way into a nearby section of Bhopal, a shantytown called Khazi Camp. Hundreds of families lived here along the road bordering the factory. This low-income section of Bhopal was peopled by manual laborers, who worked for only \$2 to \$4 a day. Only 15 metres separated these slums from the modern facilities of Union Carbide, a proximity not permitted by law.

Methyl isocyanate, the gas that escaped from a tank in the factory, is used in pesticide production. The danger lurking in vat number 610 was unsuspected. The nearly 350 doctors in Bhopal knew very little, and still don't know much, about this product. The director of the local



Shantytown across the street from the plant.
(Photo: Simantini Dhuru)

hospital confirmed after the accident that he had never been told of the danger lying in the Union Carbide factory. When the sun rose on Bhopal that Monday morning in December 1984, it revealed a disaster the world must never forget.