

Bhopal Gas Tragedy

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Dear John,

I am hoping to write to you about a tragedy that the city of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh went through back in 1984 due to a gas leakage from a fertilizer factory undertaken by Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL). I had seen several disturbing photos of disfigured children who passed away due to this disaster but watching the documentary, 'One Night in Bhopal' (2004) produced by BBC about this incident educated me furthermore towards a realization of how minute and seemingly negligible human errors can be fatal and disastrous. Ignorant about this disaster, many times, we have the mindset that mistakes are always rectifiable, but a clear observation of the effects of this event can take a serious toll on this view.

So, where do we begin? The documentary introduces a former member of the plant, the chief medical officer, Dr. Kumkum Saxena. Her story starts much before the disaster. A worker at the factory was brought to her, poisoned from phosgene, and a few days later, he passed away. This was the first death she ever encountered in her medical career and, quoting the **International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal**, this shook her with the fact that *if urgent steps were not taken, "there could be many more Ashrafs"*. She took it up to her supervisor that better measures were necessary to protect the factory workers from the harmful chemicals that were produced at and utilized by the plant, and she was interested in bringing in safety measures similar to what the Americans were doing to be prepared for any sort of accident. Shockingly, her supervisor replied that "they are Americans, we are Indians." This was the 'moment of truth' for Dr. Saxena, the instant when she realized that there was no point in trying to bring about a change from her work. As Indians, we choose to slack, and we choose to ignore the seemingly trivial but vital things of life. We say that we are a developing nation and that we are insignificant in the play of the nations, but we do not realize how important each one of our lives is. We fail to realize the need for taking care of ourselves with all caution, similar to what 'developed countries' adopt, and it was the result of such negligence that caused several thousands meet their demise on the fateful night and the following days of the accident.

Moving on, the accident happened on the night of December 2, 1984 (the morning of Dec 3), due to several reasons, predominantly the neglect of several safety measures, each of which could have severely reduced the magnitude of effect that the accident caused. To begin with, the direct event leading to the event is considered to be the negligence of a worker who was cleaning pipes with a water jet. Since methyl isocyanide (MIC) which was stored in the subsequent tanks was known to react violently with water, workers had to place a seal before cleaning, but this worker missed the safety instruction leading to a leak of water into the tank. Following this, several safety precautions were neglected: the plant's public siren was shut down, a scrubber for the passivation of MIC using caustic soda was on 'standby mode', and a flare tower that was supposed to burn excess MIC was undergoing maintenance. Each of these issues, if corrected on time, could have reduced the effect of the leak to a huge extent.

It seems a bit unreasonable that the CEO of Union Carbide Company, Warren Anderson was arrested on his arrival to India from the US. Indeed a claim that he is the sole culprit of the accident does not seem very sensible since there were several players in between whose collective negligence led to the accident. However, his arrest was a bold message to the US and the entire community of 'developed nations' that the other side of the planet is frustrated with the form of exploitation that they undertake in developing countries. While we do require economic progress

in our society from the manufacturing sector alongside other sectors, it is also true that the right to life and the right for a healthy environment are supposed to be shared with the citizens of our nation as well. It is amusing that, to this day, Union Carbide has not admitted their guilt in several erroneous decisions taken about this incident, and the only representation of their penance was via off-the-court settlements which pretty much seem like cleaning up their image rather than a proper apology.

As we endeavor to a blessed and prosperous future, let us keep in mind that we have to bear the responsibility of what we do and that we have to be accountable to ourselves and to our society for our own actions. We can relate our responsibility to our society in this manner: the Constitution of India does include rights, but along with these, it also includes our duties to our community and the world around us. As the saying goes, 'rights and responsibilities are two sides of the same coin.' It should be our moral obligation to take care of anything on which our presence can cause an influence.

Thanking you,

Aaron