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Writing "Bhopal": Rhetorical perspectives on India, environmentalism and the politics of disaster

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WRITING "BHPAL": RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INDIA, ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THE POLITICS OF DISASTER

by

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ABSTRACT

Writing "Bhopal": Rhetorical Perspectives on India, Environmentalism and the Politics of Disaster

by

Kim Laughlin

This dissertation explores the ways contemporary environmental politics in India combine older Leftist agendas with important new critiques of the role of science and technology in societal development. The primary case study is Bhopal, where micro-level issues of health care, vocational rehabilitation and housing are addressed alongside macro-level issues of international law, technology transfer and trade liberalization. The Bhopal material is situated within broader patterns of opposition through comparison with the resistance strategies of other victimized areas.

Theoretically, this dissertation is an analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by Indian environmental activists in their attempts to respond to and shape contemporary politics. Each section is both an example of a specific rhetorical strategy and an analysis of the kind of information which can be carried through the specified writing form. Threaded throughout the dissertation is an accounting of how questions about writing occur not only when confronted with the task of scholarly representation but also throughout the work of political activism, particularly when it is working within an emerging discourse such as that of environmentalism. Also emphasized is the connection between rhetorics, the contexts in which they are produced and their effects on social change.
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The research for this dissertation was carried out with the help of many political activists in India, particularly those with whom I worked in Bhopal. I was not only provided necessary information, but also new ways to think about the issues with which I dealt. Most importantly, perhaps, the activists provided noble example of intellectual and political commitment long past the point where issues seemed interesting or approachable. For this, Rajiv Lochan deserves special acknowledgment. Particular thanks are due T. R. Chouhan for his patient explanation of technical aspects and for his dependable support in practical affairs. Many meals, trains and nights of rest would have been missed without the help of Chouhan and his family. The women gas victims of BGPMUS also deserve special thanks. Their faith in my efforts showed great sensitivity to the problem of being American amidst the devastation caused by Union Carbide.

Last, I must recognize the support offered by my family. My parents and sisters have remained loyal to my efforts throughout intellectual anxiety, political indecision and financial crisis. No doubt, the debt will only build in coming years. My family also deserves special thanks for teaching me the legitimacy of a committed life, divorced from the "blase impiety" of popular culture. Ironically, their commitment to traditional values has been consummate preparation for the task of oppositional politics.

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PREFACE

SECTION ONE:

INTRODUCTION

SECTION TWO:

ADVOCATING BHOPAL

SECTION THREE:

IRONIC DEVELOPMENTS

SECTION FOUR:

STRATEGIZING "ECOLOGY"

SECTION FIVE:

PEOPLE OF THE FLAG
PREFACE

My doctoral research on the Indian environmental movement is based on three years of fieldwork, October 1989 through June 1992. I lived and worked with a group of middle-class activists providing support for a mass movement of victims of the 1984 Bhopal Gas Tragedy. I also traveled frequently to meet other activists working on different environmental issues.

My dissertation explores the ways contemporary environmental politics in India combine older Leftist agendas with important new critiques of the role of science and technology in societal development. The primary case study is Bhopal, where micro-level issues of health care, vocational rehabilitation and housing are addressed alongside macro-level issues of international law, technology transfer and trade liberalization. The Bhopal material is situated within broader patterns of opposition through comparison with the resistance strategies of other victimized areas.

Throughout the dissertation there is an assessment of the ways Indian environmentalism has cut across issues and ideologies which once seemed unrelated or even antagonistic. As one activist describes, "we have often called treason on each other, failing to realize that old blue prints are exhausted, that we need a new story,... but the return to 'Indian alternatives' cannot be a simple one. Religious fundamentalism is increasing. State controlled economic isolationism has not delivered the goods and has shown itself to be a poor guarantor of human rights. The traditional Left has itself imposed imperialist standards of the social good."¹

Other activists remind of the ways ecological crisis further exposes the difference between the First and Third Worlds. After a decision to publicly boycott Earth Day, these activists reminded that "Third World environmentalism in not only a matter of endangered monkeys or even air pollution; the Indian environmental movement must be an economic movement, a human rights movement, and a movement contesting the nature of State power and its legacy of conspiracy with imperialism."
The challenge to activists is to interrelate broad critiques with specific examples. Nehru's vision of scientific socialism must be connected to a maternal mortality rate over eleven times that of China. Campaigns to save elephants must be related to displaced tribals who have become slum dwellers; unable to read eviction notices, they live alongside the wealth of unemployed engineers. Exports created by the Green Revolution must be connected to farmers starving for cash but kept from organizing by their dependence on fertilizer subsidies. IMF "guidelines" must be connected to the overall failure to either rehabilitate Bhopal gas victims or set legal precedents which would deter multinational corporations from operating in the Third World without safety costs.

Throughout their work, activists must unveil the "shadow prices" of development through redefinition and strategic usage of key political terms. "Health", "science", "ecology" and "tradition" have all shown themselves to be contested signifiers that must be reworked through public protest, litigation and attempts to build grassroots institutions. This dissertation tries to document and participate in this redefinition process.

In Bhopal, it is overtly acknowledged that opposition is a "textualization" process. Activists argue that "the main stream press, Union Carbide and the Government of India have all tried to isolate Bhopal, relegating it to forgotten history by containing it within the logic of the market. Gas victims don't consent. They know that their incessant cough is not a natural calamity that can be traced to no source. They know that cash compensation will not rehabilitate, even if Carbide shares did bounce back on Wall Street."

Bhopal was chosen as the primary focus of my study both because it is perceived in India as symbolic of a wide range of environmental issues and because the work of activists there allowed my full participation. Because the litigation of the Bhopal case was still underway, there continued to be a large amount of English language work in responding to the progress of the Court. Thus, I was able to work with a group of activists supporting a union of women gas victims who are mostly poor, illiterate and other
wise in need of interlocutors between themselves and the official rehabilitation apparatus. We assisted in the planning of demonstrations, carried out research to support victims' demands and generally tried to secure a place in public memory for the problems which Bhopal emblemize.

My interviewing at other movement sites was structured by the issues of Bhopal. Many of these sites were coordinated by activists who had worked with gas victims at some time during the seven years since the disaster, making it possible to use a comparative approach in asking about their current projects. When I asked about the successes of literacy programs in Kerala, my intent was to understand how we should structure literacy campaigns among gas victims. When I visited participatory health projects, my intent was to understand alternatives to the state managed care available in Bhopal. When I attended meetings contesting reliance on nuclear energy, I tried to understand how radiation hazards became part of the same risk assessment process that regulated chemical pesticides. When visiting farmers' organizations, I attempted to broaden my understanding of the various critiques of the Green Revolution and the ways the Bhopal disaster had influenced these critiques.

A deeply participatory fieldwork strategy produced ethnographic material that responds well to cultural analysis attempting to question conventional modes of inquiry and representation. Such questioning is not an end in itself but a means to scholarship that is responsive to its social context. The material I gathered in the field is neither exotic or particularly timely. Environmental crisis in the Third World is a redundant topic. The plight of victims of the Bhopal Disaster has been told so often so that narration is numbing rather than provocative. As a result, attention to modes of inquiry and representation is a critical part of the analytic task. Without asking how discourse works, one remains caught in the rhetorical impasse that legitimates maintenance of the status quo.

Thus, as a whole, this dissertation is part of a broad ethnographic project that
seeks to account for the ways that representational strategies determine and are determined by powerful social forces. Implicit to this project is awareness that ethnographic representation is itself in no way exempt from determinancy and politics. As a result, there is conscious experimentation with writing alternatives and an overt goal of generating new perspectives through new narrative forms. In my own project, such experimentation is a continuation of my fieldwork and of environmental activism more generally.

Indian environmentalists are keenly aware of the play of language games. Evaluation of the efficacy of their representations is a daily effort, demonstrating the ways that environmentalism has required attention to audiences which have not always been considered a part of the political equation. Intervention requires a diversity of approaches. Opposition must continually negotiate territory by forging a language which appropriates the terms of the debate.

The effort is not that of the avant garde, an attempt to speak a completely other language uncoopted by prior definition. New things must be said but through a negotiation with older forms that preserve the commitment to "Indian alternatives." This strategy was recognized early in the Indian Left through efforts in the 1940s to use folk forms to "indigenize" the goals of the Communist Party. Now there is an attempt to recuperate this strategy but with even greater attention to diversity.

Specific styles are understood to carry different kinds of information and are also specific in their efficacy. Writing an argument to persuade court deliberations involves vehicles of transmission that would be ineffective in a pamphlet addressed to students. Analytic writing which attempts to track a history of ideas may not be sufficient for documentation of material specificity. Fictional forms may best provoke deep understanding of how processes work but they are not efficient in public arenas of political debate.

Attention to style is strategic on two levels. Understanding rhetorical structures is
part of the effort to disseminate information required for democratic participation in
decision-making about major societal concerns. Issues of science and technology,
including environmental issues, require particular attention to different audiences, to the
different kinds of information they require and to the different communicative logics
through which they can be reached.

Rhetorical analysis is also means to evaluate and generate ideology. Activists do
not understand environmental issues as mere addendums to older Leftist agendas.
There is clear awareness that both the content and form of older programs must be
questioned. Without a new blue print readily available, rhetorical analysis is a way to
monitor the way environmentalism is emerging as a mode of knowledge and action.

These strategies are part of the work of Indian environmentalism of which I was a
part. Questions about how discourse works and how it doesn't was part of our on-going
attempt to respond to the Bhopal case. Thus, focusing my dissertation on writing alter-
natives seems a continuation, and not a theoretical diversion.

Formally, this dissertation is an analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by Indian
environmental activists in their attempts to respond to and shape contemporary politics.
Each section is both an example of a specific rhetorical strategy and an analysis of the
kind of information which can be carried through the specified writing form. Threaded
throughout the dissertation is an accounting of how questions about writing occur not
only when confronted with the task of scholarly representation, but also throughout the
work of political activism, particularly when it is working within an emerging discourse
such as that of environmentalism. Also emphasized is the connection between rhetorics,
the contexts in which they are produced and their effects on social change.

Substantively, the dissertation works with a very broad definition of environmen-
talism shaped by the interconnection of issues which constitute the Bhopal case.
Science and technology issues dominate the analysis because of their structuring effect
on both the materiality of environmental problems and on the logics through which
these problems are understood. The primary tension investigated throughout the
dissertation emerges from the simultaneous operation of science and technology as
resources, both material and methodological, and as mechanisms which sustain envi-
ronmental devastation and social inequality.

Through grounding in the specific issues of the Bhopal disaster, this dissertation
attempts to question the form and content of a positive politics from within the post-
modern context in which both academics and activists now work. Specifically, the
dissertation attempts to participate in the attempt to work around the commodification
of social disaster by seeking a form of representation which works for contemporary
audiences. It is toward this attempt that the dissertation is shaped around the example
and analysis of diverse rhetorical strategies.

The basic argument carried by both the form and content of the dissertation is that
the codification and communication of environmental issues requires different kinds of
writing, relying on different tropological emphasis to most fully respond to the issues
deemed important by different audiences. Four different rhetorical strategies will be
examined and an argument made that each address the issues differently and respond to
different sets of questions. The four writing forms examined are "advocacy", "descriptive/
historical", "analytic/hermeneutic", and "fictive." 5

Advocacy writing is presented as a mode which carries arbitration, an acknowl-
edgement of different conceptions of both the normative and the real. It is presented as
the best form of writing for programmatic intervention aimed at changing existing
arrangements of the social order. It is a form of address directed to the courts, to policy
makers and to institutions of cultural production, including the media and the academy.
It acknowledges cultures in conflict but grounds itself in the shared authority of logic
and constitutionalism. The task is to confront the ontology sustained by dominant
communication structures with an alternative ontology. It is game of synecdoche chal-
lenging synecdoche. An alternative construction of the social order is proposed in the
language of wholism that belies awareness of the limitations of knowledge and planning. The disavowal is strategic. "Belief" in the blue print would involve a closure, an encapsulation process that is an instance of the very ontology being challenged. The language of wholism and authority is nonetheless necessary. Some audiences read only through syllogism, principled argument and resolution forged through adjudication.

Examples of advocacy writing produced while I was in the field include affidavits to the American courts arguing that there has been no due process in the Indian litigation, thus making it imperative to overturn a dismissal based on "forum non conveniens." In the Indian litigation, a primary strategy was to argue for alternative categorization of the health and economic status of gas victims. Advocacy writing was also used to argue for the establishment of a "Citizen's Commission on Bhopal." The Commission was to be composed of victims and non-government experts with the responsibility of overseeing rehabilitation programs and tracking official fraud. The Commission was proposed to operate for twenty years, in acknowledgment of the need for continued management divorced from the influence of changing governments.

Descriptive/historical writing is presented as a responsive form of writing which undertakes a continual effort to "complete the record." It is responsive because its audience must have a particular need for the information and an empirical context within which it can be integrated. There is no argument except the implicit insistence that all descriptive identifications are complex, situated, and changing over time. The information presented is linked to the communicative structures of audience through adjacency to prior knowledge and not through theoretical postulates. The dominant trope is metonym. The story told stands for the whole but with the assumption that the audience will place it within a broader context defined by their own experience and knowledge base.

Descriptive writing is the mode used for documenting human rights abuses. Detailed accounting of events is seen as a representational strategy that "speaks for it-
self," the detail carrying its own critique without need of explicit ideology. Descriptive writing is also the mode of a worker's account of the negligence in Carbide's Bhopal plant in the years preceding the disaster. The book "completes the record" with detail about the management process in the plant, ending with a minute-by-minute accounting of the hours leading up to the disaster. Progressive drafts of this book culled out ideological denouncements with the hope that a wider audience could be reached through tightly documented technical description.

Analytic/hermeneutic writing is an ironic mode which continually turns back on itself to ask again how its definitions are sustained. It is a questioning mode of address, a middle voiced attempt to involve its audience in the speculative process. Connections are made by four different trackings, all of which interrupt and comment on the others. The nexus is configured by the historical development of ideas, the ideologies through which ideas are constructed, the intersubjective context in which ideas are played out and by the power confronted in strategizing the dissemination of ideas through dominant communication structures. The logic is ecological but not evolutionary. It connects what seems disparate in a tentative move toward enabling usage. The definitions posited are not made through distinctive processes of syllogism but through extended analogy that recognizes the politics of labeling.

Analytic writing is used by activists when trying to initiate new political orientations. One example was a position paper produced at the meeting that followed the famous rally at Harsud in 1989, considered to be the first national gathering of grassroots environmental activists. The paper questioned whether the major signifier of the movement should be "ecology" or "environmentalism" by collating a series of statements issued by different groups in the coalition. Tension arose from the attempt to prepare a coalition position representable to the public but which did not homogenize the ideological differences among those involved. Analytic writing was also the mode of a paper given at a convention for Bhopal activists titled "Rehabilitation and Revolu-
tion?". The paper questioned the way rehabilitation programs duplicate organizational structures which exclude citizen participation and perpetrate the lack of accountability that produces victimization.

Fictive writing is dominated by metaphor. Foreign and familiar components are made analogous to allow for new stories and new constructions of the social order. Fictive writing is ontological and utopian. It posits a world, within knowledge of other worlds. It is advocacy but its links to audience are unprincipled. The guiding motifs, the terms of social construction, are established within the narrative itself. It is an interactive form. The audience must ask which world is proposed and then decide whether to commit to its rules.

Fictive writing is used by activists both to shape their own visions and to communicate ideological positions to the mass movements with which they work. Among activists, a favorite kind of telling is the "good new stories" about resistance without complicity, usually carried through an appropriation of symbols. Activists also tell explicitly utopian tales, tales of life after the drudgery of daily fights with bureaucracy, tales of natural farming projects that provide pesticide-free food untainted by market forces. Use of dramatic genres for communication with mass movements has been prevalent since the efforts of the Communist Party in the 1940s to use folk forms and performance techniques to denaturalize rural oppression. "People's Theater" continues to be active in India but with heightened sensitivity to reliance on traditional mythologies due to the rise of Hindu fundamentalism as a political force.

Analytic differentiation of these writing forms is a fieldwork approach to writing itself. Writing is conceived as a culture with multiple traditions and multiple possibilities. Like science and technology, writing is understood as social behavior which institutionalizes and legitimates tragic choices. There is a role for the expert, for technical competence in the operation of rhetoric. Ultimately, however, the goal is social. Neither technology or rhetoric is an end in itself.
Thus, in the broadest sense, this dissertation is about India, environmentalism, rhetoric and anthropology. India is not approached as a geographical terrain with physical and cultural integrity but as a site of negotiation between local and global processes. Environmentalism is approached as an emerging discourse which is reconstructing national identities through critical and strategic use of diverse modes of representation. The Bhopal Disaster is conceived as a primary forum for environmentalism because it involves micro issues like housing and health care alongside macro issues of technology transfer, international law and trade policy.

Rhetoric is conceived as a forum for the construction of meaning which acknowledges diverse communicative logics in order to communicate to a plurality of audiences. Within anthropology, this dissertation attempts to merge two separate orientations of scholarly enquiry. In conventional ethnography, literary analysis is kept separate from analysis aimed at formulating programmatic agendas for public policy and institution building. Implicit to the separation is a failure to mingle cultural and symbolic interpretation with assessments of political-economic realities. Separations are also assumed between empirical and normative representations. My research circumvents these separations in an attempt to follow through with the commitments and strategies of the activists who were my informants. The dissertation emphasizes the strategic use of diverse methodologies, modes of representation and institutional structures. The goal is to both understand the social context of environmental issues and to acquire competence in responding to these issues.

Application of rhetorical analysis to practical projects is a process which continually threatens slippage into idealization. The process is grounded only by an incremental approach which continually evaluates the vasculating relation between form and content. Such evaluation is the goal of this dissertation. Each section is both an example of a certain form and an assessment of the operation of the form. The question of efficacy threads through each attempt to establish a focus, a purpose and a style which
can carry them.

Evaluation of the efficacy of writing, science and technology is a daily effort for environmental activists in India. The method of assessment is textual. Political orientation emerges not so much through a mapping of the ideological and the real as through continual attempts to link structural components. Questions are not so much about intention and meaning as about effect. The reader and the citizen are privileged. The writer, science and technology are judged according to their production of social benefit. My dissertation follows this method, seeking a textual questioning and production of political value.

As a whole, this dissertation should be approached as a reflective, strategic mode of writing. Reflective writing is a mode which tracks the production of knowledge through the writing process itself and through the social positioning in which writing occurs. It addresses the writer herself and others who share the writing task. Reflective writing acknowledges a crisis of representation not only within writing but also in the object of study, in the social order itself. It reads the world as a construction laden with interests and values. The position of writing is continually configured within the construction and not allowed a distance that claims objective or aesthetic privilege. The dominant trope is parody, a trope which tracks a miming process that iterates sufficiently to show itself as mime. The writer watches herself write and thus attempts to better understand the politics emergent from the process.

Reflective writing is akin to confessional writing. Within Protestant theology, confessional writing emerged as a self-conscious mode when historical relativism began to define the context of theological work. Confessional writing was opposed to apologetic writing as a way to thought and understanding that is ethical yet cognizant of the limits of human understanding. Knowledge was produced through dialogue with the history of Christian discourse rather than through recourse to inerrant Scripture. Universal knowledge and rules for behavior were replaced with a "responsive" ethics gener-
ated through simultaneous attention to circumstance and to a certain interpretive
tradition. The ethics proposed were acknowledged to be relative, but not wholly conting-
genent on context.

This dissertation is dialogically linked to the overlapping discourses of anthropol-
ogy and of the Left. As a whole, it attempts to participate in a shared project to renego-
tiate the divide between scholarship and politics. Hopefully, the result will be better scholarship, and better politics.

ENDNOTES

1 All unreferenced quotations throughout this dissertation are from discussions in Bhopal and elsewhere in India with the environmental activists with whom I worked.

2 This project has been defined by many anthropologists, including those in my department at Rice. Key foci were addressed in Anthropology as Cultural Critique (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) and Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

3 "Language games" are theorized in the work of Lyotard as part of his critique of the monolithic explanatory modes which defined the Enlightenment project.

4 The phrase "Indian alternatives" refers to development goals that are responsive to the needs and resources of local communities. It is a critique of conventional development models oriented toward export and dependent on continual inputs of foreign capital and technology. The phrase is repeated often by political activists, partly because substantive and specific aspects of alternative development models continue to be debated.

5 There is a long tradition of scholarly focus on rhetoric. I have been particularly inspired by the work of Stephen Tyler and Hayden White. However, these differentiations come from my material and not from an established legacy of rhetorical analysis.

6 As I understand it, theoretical attention to "confessional writing" emerged at Yale Divinity School in the 1940s, particularly through the work of H. Richard Niebuhr. The Meaning of Revelation (Niebuhr, 1941) is both an example and explanation of confessional writing.
SECTION ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Victims of the Bhopal disaster live in the old part of the city, downwind from the Union Carbide plant. Most are poor, illiterate and otherwise in need of interlocutors between themselves and the official rehabilitation apparatus. Support for the victims has come from a range of groups, both autonomous and with affiliations to political parties.

The largest organization of gas victims is Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (Bhopal Gas Affected Working Women's Union) (BGPMUS). There is a formal membership of approximately 14,000 but weekly meetings usually have only a few hundred participants. The leader of BGPMUS is Jabbar Khan, a gas victim who first became involved in relief efforts in his home locality and later developed as a spokesman for the interests of all victims.

BGPMUS is provided support by a range of middle-class groups. Groups from all over India have used petitions and other mechanisms to show their solidarity. These groups regularly publicize support for the demands made by BGPMUS and also contribute to the on-going process of keeping Bhopal in public memory, as a marker of environmental crisis linked to development policy dependent on foreign investment. These groups recognize that "Bhopal" must become a symbol and lesson for the future. Their attempts are akin to those of Japanese writers who write about Hiroshima, stressing the importance of recognizing not only the awesome scientific achievement of technology but also its capacity for devastation.

More specific support for BGPMUS comes from two groups which focus on legal strategies of redress. The International Coalition for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB) is a New York based group which has waged a campaign to expose the connection between industrial hazard and human rights violations. ICJB has also contributed to the formal legal
process in both the United States and India through amicus briefs and other publications documenting Carbide's liability and the continuing suffering of victims. Bhopal Gas Victims' Solidarity Organization is a Delhi based group comprised of lawyers, doctors, and journalists who are able to formulate legal arguments, supporting evidence and demands for alternative rehabilitation programs.

The daily work of BGPMUS is supported by Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA). BGIA was established in 1985 by a groups of activists who had worked in the coalition which formed immediately following the disaster. Since then, the size of the group has ranged from two to seven persons. The agenda of BGIA is to attend to the whole range of problems emergent from the disaster. Local issues of health care, vocational rehabilitation and housing are necessarily connected to broader issues of political corruption, development policy and cultural imperialism. Response strategies include attempts to educate and mobilize victims and attempts to document health and economic conditions. BGIA has regularly published a news sheet for victims and also a range of publications for a broader audience.

To situate the data and views presented elsewhere in this dissertation, I have included here the text of a pamphlet distributed by BGIA, the group with which I worked throughout my stay in Bhopal. We produced Voices of Bhopal for the anniversary commemoration rally in 1990. The opening comments and interviews show both the range of issues with which we regularly dealt and a numbing redundancy. This pamphlet, like this dissertation, is part of an attempt to use narrative forms to generate new perspectives and change circumstances on the ground. Focus on the stories told by gas victims themselves is a strategic move that counters official attempts to control information and action. Such control was blatantly visible when the Government of India accepted an out-of-court settlement with Union Carbide without plaintiff consent. Later, the Supreme Court of India acknowledged a "denial of natural justice" but justified the denial by appeal to the "situational particularities" of the Bhopal case. As these
interviews tell, the "situational particularities" of Bhopal demonstrate a failure of rehabilitation that the Government of India is not prepared to acknowledge:

opening statement

On the night of 2nd-3rd December, 1984, 40 tons of toxic gas was released from a Union Carbide pesticides plant in Bhopal, India. In the immediate aftermath, 3000 died and over 400,000 others were exposed and have continued to die and suffer. Misery in Bhopal increases daily as victims begin to suffer the long term effects of toxic exposure and the consequences of damage to their immune systems, which makes them prone to debilitating infections. Meanwhile, the struggle for justice continues. Victims continue to speak out about the need for proper rehabilitation programs and for punishment of Union Carbide.

The Union Carbide plant was set up in 1969 as part of the effort to bring Green Revolution prosperity through high yield agriculture that is dependent on heavy inputs of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The plant was located in an already densely populated area despite city planning codes which require facilities handling hazardous substances to be located away from human settlements. Nonetheless, the plant was not designed to fully accommodate safety precautions; it was poorly maintained and negligently operated. On several occasions prior to the disaster, workers attempted to point out potential hazards but were ignored by the management, which was intent on a cost-cutting drive.

The Government failed to enforce regulations of safety standards at the Carbide plant because they remained convinced that the benefits of foreign investment and accompanying reliance on chemical agriculture would bring "development" to India. While there is today a general concern about the harmful sociological and ecological implications of such "development," the Government response to periodic developmental crises remains essentially symptomatic. Governmental response to the Bhopal disaster has been symptomatic at all levels.¹ Medical care, job generation and housing
issues have only been dealt with superficially.

According to a recent study, 70 to 80% of the population in severely affected areas and 40 to 50% in mildly affected areas continue to suffer from breathlessness, fatigue, loss of appetite, loss of acuity of vision, menstrual irregularities, anxiety, depression and a host of other problems. Damages to the respiratory, reproductive, nervous, musculoskeletal and immune systems of gas victims have been documented in epidemiological studies carried out so far. The 1990 report of studies carried out by the Indian Council of Medical Research states that the death rates among the affected population is more than double that of the unexposed population. Significantly, higher incidence of spontaneous abortion, still births and infant mortality among the gas victims have also been documented in this report.

Despite these deteriorating health conditions, a proper line of medical treatment is yet to be available. Gas affected people continue to be given symptomatic treatment offering only temporary relief, if at all. While Union Carbide continues to withhold information on the effect of released gases on the human body and means to deal with these effects, research sponsored by the Government of India has also yielded little towards a cure. Many observers suggest that there is a governmental will not to know what the released gases were or their long term effects, as a way to avoid admission of the magnitude of the tragedy. Hiding the magnitude of the tragedy allows the government to both ignore immediate responsibilities to provide aid to victims and to ignore the need to change economic policies which promote investment into hazardous industries, particularly those operated by multinational corporations.

Another symptomatic response to the disaster has been the government's disproportionate emphasis on interim relief rather than on job generation. While the interim relief available since last June has significantly lessened the economic deprivation of gas affected people, its disbursement has been highly corrupt and inefficient. Further, the interim relief payments of Rs 200($8) per month will only be given for three years.
The Government has made no long term plan to create jobs suitable for a permanently disabled population. Prior to the disaster, the majority of the victims earned their living through hard physical labor. Exposure to Union Carbide's gases has led to a substantial reduction in their capacity to work. Hence, there is an urgent need for provision of jobs in accord with the health condition of gas victims. It has been suggested that a substantial number of gas victims can be employed to provide medical, educational and other services that are essential for the rehabilitation of the community.

A third symptomatic response spearheaded by the government has been a "Bhopal Beautification Plan" which legitimated the demolition of a large number of houses in the areas adjacent to the Carbide plant. In June 1990, residents were given a few moments notice before bulldozers rolled over their homes. They were not compensated for loss of property; further, the long process of compensation for gas exposure was disrupted because identification of claimants is based on residential addresses. These unnecessary and illegal demolitions to beautify Bhopal occurred while gas affected people continue to live without access to clean drinking water, hygienic living conditions or pucca (solid walled) houses. These basic needs of gas affected people have been ignored despite clear documentation of gas induced damage to their immune systems which makes them susceptible to infections.

Meanwhile, the case against Union Carbide is yet to cross the preliminary stages of litigation. 2 Currently, the Supreme Court is hearing the review petitions that challenge the validity of the February 1989 settlement between Union Carbide and the Government of India. Unless the settlement is struck down, Union Carbide will be absolved of all civil and criminal liabilities in return for a sum $470,000,000. Conservative estimates have placed the cost of medical surveillance alone in the range of $600,000,000. Further, it is clear that a settlement of $470,000,000 will not have any deterrent effect on the hazardous operations of big corporations. Among gas victims, faith in the legal process is not strong; the courts are seen to be part of the establishment.
that benefited from Carbide's operations. Victims forcefully argue that they would have been ignored completely had they not carried out sustained public protest, insisting that their lives not be sold in exchange for the glamour of Indian participation in global capitalism.

People's struggle has been strong and sustained since the gas tragedy. Victims and those who support their cause believe solidarity to be the only way to justice and to transformation of the institutional structures which caused the Bhopal tragedy. Solidarity is seen as the only way to insist that communities like those in Bhopal will not accept impositions of risk that serve the interests of multinational corporations. Solidarity against Union Carbide is the only path to a world without "Bhopals."

**Interview with Bano Bi, age 35, resident of Chhawni Mangalwara**

The night the gas leaked, I was sewing clothes sitting next to the door. It was around midnight. The children's father had just returned from a poetry concert. He came in and asked me, "What are you burning that makes me choke?" And then it became quite unbearable. The children sleeping inside began to cough. I spread a mat outside and made the children sit on it. Outside, we started coughing even more violently and became breathless. Then our landlord and my husband went out to see what was happening. They found out that some gas had leaked. Outside there were people shouting "Run, run, run for your lives."

We left our door open and began to run. We reached the Bharat Talkies crossing where my husband jumped into a truck full of people going to Raisen and I jumped into one going towards Obaidullahganj. It was early morning when we reached Obaidullahganj. The calls for the morning prayers were on. As we got down, there were people asking us to get medicines put on our eyes and to get injections. Some people came and said they had made tea for us and we could have tea and need not pay any money.

Meanwhile, some doctors came there. They said the people who are seriously ill
had to be taken to the hospital. Two doctors came to me and said that I had to be taken to the hospital. I told my children to come with me to the hospital and bade them to stay at the hospital gate till I came out of the hospital. I was kept inside for a long time and the children were getting worried. Then Bhairon Singh, a Hindu who used to work with my husband, spotted the children. He, too, had run away with his family and had come to the hospital for treatment. The children told him that I was in the hospital since morning and described to the him the kind of clothes I was wearing.

Bhairon Singh went in to the hospital and found me among the piles of the dead. He then put me on a bench and ran around to get me oxygen. The doctors would put the oxygen mask on me for two minutes and then pass it on to someone else who was in as much agony as I was. The oxygen made me feel a little better. The children were crying for their father so Bhairon told them that he was admitted to a hospital in Raisen. When I was being brought back to Bhopal on a truck, we heard people saying that the gas tank had burst again. So we came back and went beyond Obaidullahganj to Budhni, where I was in the hospital for three days.

I did not even have a five paisa coin on me. Bhairon Singh spent his money on our food. He even hired a taxi to take me back to Bhopal to my brother's place. My husband had come back by then. He was in terrible condition. His body would get stiff and he had difficulty breathing. At times, we would give up hope of his survival. My brother took him to a hospital. I said that I would stay at the hospital to look after my husband. I still had a bandage over my eyes. When the doctors at the hospital saw me, they said, "Why don't you get admitted yourself, you are in such a bad state?". I told them that I was all right. I was so absorbed with the suffering of my children and my husband that I wasn't aware of my own condition. But the doctors got me admitted and since there were no empty beds, I shared the same bed with my husband in the hospital. We were in that hospital for one and a half months.

After coming home from the hospital, my husband was in such a state that he
would rarely stay at home for more than two days. He used to be in the Jawahar Lal Nehru Hospital most of the time. Apart from all the medicines that he used to take at the hospital, he got medicines like Deriphylline and Decadron from the store. He remained in that condition after the gas disaster. I used to take him to the hospital and when I went for the Sangathan meetings, the children took him to the hospital. He was later admitted to the MIC ward and he never came back. He died in the MIC ward.

My husband used to carry sacks of grain at the warehouse. He used to load and unload railway wagons. After the gas, he could not do any work. Sometimes, his friends used to take him with them and he used to just sit there. His friends gave him 5-10 rupee notes and we survived on that.

We were in a helpless situation. I had no job and the children were too young to work. We survived on help from our neighbors and other people in the community. My husband had severe breathing problems and he used to get into bouts of coughing. When he became weak, he had fever all the time. He was always treated for gas related problems. He was never treated for tuberculosis. And yet, in the post-mortem report, they mentioned that he died due to tuberculosis. He was medically examined for compensation but they never told us in which category he was put. And now they tell me that his death was not due to gas exposure, that I cannot get the relief of Rs 10,000 ($400) which is given to relatives of the dead.

I have pain in my chest and I get breathless when I walk. The doctors told me that I need to be operated on for ulcers in my stomach. They told me it would cost Rs 10,000 ($400). I do not have so much money. All the jewelry that I had has been sold. I have not paid the landlord for the last six years and he harasses me. How can I go for the operation? Also, I am afraid that if I die during the operation, there would be no one to look after my children.

I believe that even if we have to starve, we must get the guilty officials of Union Carbide punished. They have killed someone's brother, someone's husband, someone's
mother, someone's sister; how many tears can Union Carbide wipe? We will get Union Carbide punished. Till my last breath, I will not leave them.

**interview with Abdul Zahoor, age 30, resident of Baug Umraodulha**

I get swelling in my stomach. I become extremely uneasy and cry out in pain. Sometimes this happens all through the night. I am tired of x-rays done and the doctors say nothing about my disease. I have gone to all kinds of doctors, the big ones too. I have been to Sajjad Nursing Home, the J. P. Hospital and to the Hamidia Hospital. I have even gone to the Hakims and Homeopathic doctors. But it has been like this. Pain, pain, all the time. I became weak, had body aches and fever for a long time after the gas, but earlier I didn't have this pain in my stomach. They have done my medical examination but now they tell me I have been put in "B" category. I had shown them my medical papers. Still. I haven't been able to work for the last two years and have stayed in bed all the time. I depend on my brothers for food and my treatment. Something has to be done for this pain in the stomach. I am getting the interim relief of Rs 200 ($8), but it isn't enough for my treatment. I have to spend 700 to 800 rupees on treatment every month. And yet there is no relief.

**interview with Natthibai, age 55, resident of Rajendra Nagar**

My husband's name was Dukhishtyam. He got a lot of gas in him. On the night the gas leaked, both of us ran towards the forest. He remained sick afterwards. He used to get breathless, cough and his eyes would get very big. He could not see properly after the gas. Twice he was admitted to the hospital. The second time he was admitted, he never came back. He died in the MIC ward. I gave an application for Rs 10,000 ($400) in interim relief, but they haven't done anything about it yet. Last year, he died in Kunwar (autumn). They haven't yet told me whether I will get Rs 10,000 or not. I gave them all the medical prescriptions of my husband with my application.
I stay sick. I have come back from the hospital on 13th of this month (November 1990). I was there for one and a half months. I never got breathless before the gas; I used to work as a laborer. Now I get badly breathless and my chest pains. I was in the hospital during the Festival of Lights. This gas has destroyed us completely.

**interview with Ajeeza Bi, age 30, resident of Kazi Camp**

Ever since the gas, my head aches 24 hours a day. I have pain in my stomach and sometimes feel giddy. My daughter, Nasreen, cannot see properly, cannot thread a needle and she is only eleven. My other daughter, Sofia, also stays sick and she is eight. I have three children from before the gas disaster and after the gas I have aborted thrice. All three times it happened in the hospital. Once I was six months pregnant; the second time I was seven months pregnant and the third time I carried the baby for eight months. They were all born dead. All with black skin like the color of coal and all shrunken in size. The doctors never told me why such things are happening to me.4

**interview with Asad, age 14, resident of Ibrahimpura**

I get breathless and often I am down with fever. Also, I cough a lot. I go to school but I cannot study. I forget things easily and my eyes burn. I study in a government school. Ever since the gas, I am always taking medicines. Those doctors who were examining me, I told them I have breathing problems. But they have sent this notice that says I’ve been put in "B" category.

**interview with Sabra Bi, age 40, resident of Kazi Camp**

I have been in and out of several hospitals since the gas disaster. In 1986, I was told that they were registering the claims of the gas victims. So I took my children and stood in the queue to get my claim form filled. It was a long queue and there were at least 250 people before me. When my turn came up, the fellow who was filling the
claim forms said that he would not fill claims for children. He said only people over
eighteen years could file claims. When I insisted, he asked me to put the medical pre-
scriptions of the children along with their father's claim form. But that did not work.
Later, when people were receiving notices to get themselves medically examined, there
were no notices for my children. So their medical examinations were not done.

I was in the hospital when the people who were carrying on the (Tata Institute)
survey came to my place. They took down the names that were listed in the family
ration card. But all the names were not shown there. The ration card was issued fifteen
years back and only three of my six children were listed on it. When the claims forms
were filed, my daughter Afroz was twelve years old. Gulnaaz was ten years old.
Mehenaaz was nine years. Neelofar was seven years and the youngest, a son, Firodous,
was two years. The government fellows did not put any of these children’s claims in
their register.

interview with Badruddin, age 50, resident of Pulbogda

I was asked to report to the Identification Center on 23rd of last month (October
1990). There they told me that the names of my children that were on the notices did
not match with the names they had on their records. The names of my two sons and one
daughter were wrongly recorded. I went to the Collector’s office to get the names
corrected. I was made to go from one office to another. It took three days to get the
names corrected. And my daughter's name is yet to be corrected. I showed them all
her medical papers, even her affidavit, but they are yet to correct the name.

interview with Shaheem Bano, age 30, resident of Budhvara

Three of my children have yet to file their claims. All three were born before the
gas disaster. The oldest, Samad, is 12 years old; then Malka is 8 years old and the third
son, Amjad, is 7 years old. When they were filling the claims forms, I told them to file
the children's claims. But they said such young children cannot file claims. "We will put these children's claims along with their father's papers," they said. But they did not even write down the names of these children. Earlier, when the survey people had come, I told them the names of all my children. But they took down names from the rations card. Our ration card is twenty years old. It does not have the names of all the children. I told those government fellows that my children have been left out. All they say is "We will see, we will see."

**interview with Shakila Bano, age 30, resident of J.P. Nagar**

Right after the disaster, I was admitted to the Katju Hospital. Then I was admitted to the Hamidia Hospital for a long time in the MIC ward. The doctors told me that my x-ray pictures showed that my lungs were badly damaged. I had filed my claims and was called for medical examination. The medical examination, they said, was necessary to make my case strong for compensation. They did all kinds of examinations. They did blood tests, sputum tests, urine tests and also took x-ray pictures. I was once again admitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital after that. Now they sent me this notice which says I have been put in category "B". It says that I only suffered temporary injury due to the gas and I am all right now. Even now I cough so badly all the time; I throw up blood sometimes. I have pain in my chest. When I get admitted to the hospital, the doctors do not let me go home. "You are still very sick," they say, and ask me to stay on at the hospital.

**interview with Ramkishan, age 40, resident of Chhola Road**

I used to work at the Formulation plant in Union Carbide's factory. I had been working there ever since the sixth month of the year 1973. When I joined, I used to work as a casual worker. For six years, I worked as a casual worker. They made me a permanent worker in the third month of 1980. I was working in the Formulation plant
on the night the gas leaked. The tank of MIC which leaked was only 400 feet from the Formulation Plant. When the gas started leaking, some people cried out "Run, Run" and we left our work and ran towards the west.

Later, the factory was closed down. There was nothing for me to do. The government offered me jobs but they were all away from Bhopal. I was given jobs in Mhow, Rajgarh and Indore, none in Bhopal. My wife had taken a lot of gas and she was pregnant at the time. So I could not stay away from Bhopal. Now I work as a daily wage laborer. I get jobs 15 to 20 days in a month and make about 20 to 25 rupees in a day ($1). There are quite a few Carbide workers who could not find employment after the factory was closed down. I personally know about one hundred of such workers. After the factory was closed, I was given six months salary as compensation, nothing else.

I was just a worker there, how could I know what poisons were stored in there? I was never told that there were such dangerous chemicals inside the factory. If I knew, I would not have worked in that factory. The plant used to smell awfully at times, but we were just workers; how could we know? When we worked there, our eyes used to hurt and our skin itched but whoever knew that such a disaster could happen?

interview with Jaya Mane, age 28, resident of Rajendra Nagar

I get breathless when I walk and now my head aches so badly that I cannot do any sewing or reading. The doctors had done my medical examination. But later they sent a notice which said they found me to be only temporarily injured. I do not know whether we can ask them to do another medical examination. I have started to get interim relief but the bank is quite far. I have to spend Rs 20 ($1) to go to the bank.

interview with Sher Khan, age 45, resident of Chhola Road

I work at the railway coach factory. I have been living in this house for the last
50 years. This year, they announced from a jeep that they would demolish the houses on both sides of the road. People in my community and the tenants who had rented shops were very troubled. Quite a few cried their hearts out. Those who protested got arrested. Some people who tried to argue with the government officials were beaten up by the cops. And the bulldozers went on demolishing house after house as we watched in silence and sorrow. After my house was demolished, I was so sad I could not eat food for four days. It was raining then and my children were crying. I cried too.

I have made a tiny shelter out of whatever was left after the demolition. I still have the registration papers for my house. This house had been there for the last sixty years and they never told us that we had encroached upon government land. This anti-encroachment drive is a lot of bunkum. It was as if the government had declared war on the people. All day they would carry out the demolitions and at night they rested till they blew the bugle the next morning. They cut off the water connections, the electricity connections and turned us homeless. They have not given us any compensation or any land. First, we were attacked by Union Carbide gas and then by the government's bulldozers. Where are we to go?

**interview with Mohini, age 32, resident of Mahamayee Ka Baug**

Our organization, the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan, started from a sewing centre. After the gas disaster a rehabilitation centre run by an organization was started in September '85 with government help. About 600 women used to be given sewing jobs from this centre. There were 30 of us employed who were employed for cutting cloth at the centre and this cut cloth was given to the women for sewing at their homes. In December 1986, this centre was closed down. All of a sudden the women who were dependent on the sewing job became jobless. The 30 of us decided that something must be done to get the centre reopened. So we, along with 600 other women, marched to the Chief Minister's residence. We went on several demonstrations
and had to face the police on many occasions. In April '87, 225 of us were arrested and put in jail. It was a long and hard struggle. Most of us were quite sick due to the gas. During one demonstration, a woman named Hamida Bi fell unconscious with chest pain and died 4 days later. We finally managed to get the centre reopened and now 2300 women are getting sewing jobs.

After we got the centre reopened our organization grew in number and we took up the issues of medical treatment and economic rehabilitation of the gas victims. We also campaigned against Union Carbide, organized rallies demanding punishment of the guilty officials of the company and adequate compensation for all gas victims. We opposed the unholy settlement between Union Carbide and Rajiv Gandhi's government. On five separate occasions, more than 3000 women from the Sangathan have gone to Delhi and voiced our opposition to the settlement.

We have also filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging the validity of the settlement and now it is being heard. Earlier in August 1988, we had filed a petition seeking interim relief from the Government. On 13th March 1990, the Supreme Court ordered the Government to pay Rs 200 ($8) per person per month to all the residents of the 36 gas-affected wards of Bhopal for three years. This amount is being disbursed but there are a lot of problems in the manner in which this is being done. We know that the struggle against Union Carbide will be a long one and we are determined to carry on with our struggle till justice is done.

**interview with Sahodra Bai, age 55, resident of Lakherapura**

My husband Shantilal died on 12th May 1990. After the gas, he had difficulty breathing. He never went to work after the gas. He couldn't earn any money. The children earned something by doing odd jobs. I cannot see properly and I get breathless. I cannot do any work. Union Carbide is responsible for my husband's death. I should be given relief money of Rs 10,000 ($400) and should be given enough compensation so
that we have enough to eat and get ourselves treated.

**interview with Shahazadi Bahar, age 35, resident of Barkhedi**

I joined the Sangathan in 1988. I was looking for a sewing job. I went to a number of places all around Bhopal. Then one of my friends asked me to become a member of the Sangathan. She asked me to come for the Sangathan meetings and talk about my problems there. So I filled a form and became a member of the Sangathan. Now I am so closely attached with the Sangathan that when I do not go for the meetings, I miss it as people miss their dear ones.

The world is very selfish. I, too, joined the Sangathan with some selfish motive. I thought I could get some sewing job through the Sangathan. But though I have not been benefitted, there are others who have. Quite a few people have got monetary relief of Rs 1000 ($40), Rs 3000 ($120), and Rs 750 ($30) per month. And now the provision of interim relief of Rs 200 ($8) per month per person is a big victory for the Sangathan. This has brought in a new hope and a new determination. We are certain that we will win this battle.

The Bhopal victims are entitled to compensation. We need hospitals, medicines, jobs, clean air and water. We have to have medical treatment centers in the community itself. The bigger things are, the more they create problems. Hamidia hospital is so big but we cannot get treatment there; only those with money are treated properly. We need jobs that do not need hard physical work. I get breathless when I walk and can not see properly. Two of my daughters are being treated for tuberculosis.

They should not have allowed Union Carbide to set up its factory. When these companies want to set up some factory, they mention some product in the agreement (with the government) and they start producing something else. Then the people in the neighborhood do not get to know what is being produced. Workers in the factory are forbidden to speak to people in the community. Such factories should not be allowed to
be set up, the neighboring community must be consulted.

The officials of Union Carbide should be given the severest punishment. If someone kills just one person, he is put in jail for 20 years. And here the Carbide officials have not been put behind bars for even 20 minutes. They should be hanged. I am certain that the Sangathan will win the battle. The struggle for truth will be a success. Truth always wins, it only takes a little longer.

**interview with Dinkar Rao, age 16, resident of Kazi Camp**

When the gas leaked, we were all sleeping. We started coughing and getting choked. I thought someone was burning red chilies in the neighborhood. But my mother said it was some kind of gas. She knew, she read a lot of books. She asked everybody to stay indoors but my father did not listen. He opened the door and went out to see. Thick clouds of gas filled the room. Our parents covered us up with a quilt from all sides. So we were a little protected. But my parents took in a lot of that gas. That is why they fell so sick.

My father could not do any work after the gas disaster. He used to remain sick and in 1986 he died. My mother used to be sick also. Doctors took x-ray pictures and said her lungs had been badly damaged. Some doctors said she had got tuberculosis but we do not believe that. In 1986, she was admitted to the Jawahar Lal Nehru Hospital. She used to get breathless and used to cough all the time. She could not go to office to work. My mother died in February 1988 in the hospital. Since then, I have become a full time worker in the Sangathan.

We are opposing the settlement between Union Carbide and Government of India done in February 1989. The settlement would have meant that Union Carbide officials would have been let off without any punishment. We cannot let this happen. Carbide's officials must be punished. If these officials are let off easily, they will go on killing people and making them sick. What happened in Bhopal should not happen anywhere
Suleman Khan, age 50, resident of Ashoka Garden

I have been working as a booking agent in the Madhya Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation for the last 24 years. I was on duty right after the disaster and during Operation Faith when the Corporation's buses were used to carry people who were running away from Bhopal. I started having serious health problems about a month after the gas leak. In May '86 I was transferred to Piparia, 150 kilometers away from Bhopal. There were no facilities for medical treatment in the Piparia hospital. So I had to absent myself from my duty and come to Bhopal. They stopped my salary. I wrote many applications to get myself transferred back to Bhopal. More than 2 years later, they transferred me back but I am still not getting my salary.

I was admitted in the MIC ward in June '87 and remained there for more than three years. I was so breathless they had to put me on oxygen. The doctor in charge of the MIC ward has written on my papers that my lungs are badly damaged. I have to take 8 to 12 tablets in a day to be able to talk, move about or just to breathe. I have written 17 letters to the officials of the Corporation, 7 letters to the Chief Minister and 4 letters to the Prime Minister. I have requested them to pay me my salary, give me some monetary relief and do something for my medical treatment. These medicines don't seem to be working.

In August '87, I was called for medical examination by the Directorate of Claims. I was in the MIC ward at that time. Then, after 2 years, when I was still in the hospital, they sent me a notice which said that I have been put in Category 'B'. My wife was also admitted in the MIC ward. She too has been told by the Claims Directorate that she has suffered only temporary injury. Like they said for me. I wrote a letter saying that there was something terribly wrong in putting me in Category 'B'. The doctor in charge of the MIC ward put in his recommendation in that letter. It has been almost a
year since and they haven't replied yet.

**interview with Puniya Bai, age 65, resident of Chhola Road**

This was an old house. My husband's parents built it a long time back. And now the government has demolished it. They did not give us any notice before breaking it down. It has been six months since the bulldozer demolished my house and they have not talked about giving any compensation. I do not want money; I should be given a house somewhere. They broke down the house in the middle of the rainy season. The children had no shelter and there was no place to light a fire or to cook food. The house had an identification number, which was a proof that we had been affected by the gas. Once we are shifted away from this place, we will lose that proof. The government fellows will not believe us when we tell them we have been exposed to the gasses from Carbide.

**interview with Chhotelal, age 50, resident of Barkhedi**

I used to work as a porter for transport companies. Since the gas, I have not been able to work for a single day. The gas killed my daughter; she died in the morning after the gas leak. I am breathless all the time and I cough badly. My eyes have become weak, too. I have been admitted to the MIC ward more than 5 times since 1987. Last year, I was there for 9 months at a stretch. This year, I have come home after eight months.

**interview with Ganga Bai, age 63, resident of Rajendra Nagar**

I have started getting interim relief of Rs 200 ($8) per month. But there are lots of problems. To get my photograph taken, I would have to go to Indrapuri, which is twelve kilometers away. The bank is fifteen kilometers away, in Abiragarh. My son took me on his bicycle to the bus stand and I had to change two buses to reach the bank.
And I had to make three trips to the bank before I got the money. Now they have brought the bank a little closer. Even then I had to spend Rs 24 ($1) on an auto rickshaw. The banks are very crowded and the queues are long. Once I fell down on the ground while I was waiting in the queue.

**interview with Suleman, age 45, resident of Shanajanabad**

I am in Bhopal for the last 10 years. Before the gas disaster, I used to sell vegetables on a push cart. I have become too weak to work now. After I was exposed to the gas, I tried pushing the cart but I became so breathless it was impossible to move. Some time back, I went to sell vegetables but was so ill afterwards that I had to be admitted to the hospital. Five bottles of intravenous medicine were given to me because I was so sick. Since then, I have not tried to take the vegetable cart around. For a few days, I worked as a watchman but that, too, was difficult. Now I have given up. I stay in my sister's place; her family arranges for my food. All the treatment that I have taken until now has done no good. Factories like Union Carbide's should not be allowed anywhere in the world. Not even if they build it far from human settlements.

**interview with Mohammad Nafees, age 25, resident of Budwara**

My children are named Assu and Sharik. One is about 7 years old and the other is 6 years old. When the gas leaked, my elder son was eight months old; my younger son was born four months after the disaster. Both of them have difficulty in breathing and they cough a lot. The doctor says that they have tuberculosis. They have been taking treatment for tuberculosis for the last four years. Even now they are under treatment. I get tablets and capsules for them from the hospital. Sometimes I have to buy capsules from the store; one capsule costs one and a half rupee. You tell me that one should not take drugs for tuberculosis for so long. But what do we know? We do what the doctor tells us. No one in my family ever had tuberculosis. Both my wife and
me also have breathing trouble. Before the gas I used to spend a lot of time working at the bakery. Now I can't sit close to the oven.

**Interview with Shahida Bi, age 25, resident of Bharat Talkies**

A few months after the gas disaster, I had a son. He was alright. After that I had another child in the hospital. But it was not fully formed. It had no limbs and no eyes and was born dead. Then another child was born but it died soon after. I had another child just one and a half months back. It's skin looked scalded and only half its head was formed. The other half was like a membrane filled with water. It was born dead and was white all over. I had a lot of pain two months before I delivered. My legs hurt so much that I couldn't sit or walk around. I got rashes all over my body. The doctors said that I would be okay after the childbirth but I still have these problems.

**Interview with Narayani Bai, age 35, resident of Mahamayee Ka Baug**

This is the sixth time I have been admitted to the MIC ward. I have been here since the last month of 1985. When I feel a little better, the doctors send me home but I can't stay there for long. My breathlessness become acute and my husband has to bring me back to the hospital. The doctors say that the gases have damaged my lungs badly. They say nothing can be done about my disease. Before the gas, I had never seen the insides of a hospital. And now, I have spent most of the last five years on this hospital bed. I used to work as an assistant at a day care centre and now I cannot do any work. My husband Kaluram also cannot go to his job. He used to carry loads. My son works as a tailor; he is the only one earning in the family.

**Interview with Mohammad Ajez, age 22, resident of Vidhan Sabha**

I am 22 years old and the notice for interim relief that came in my name said I was 46 years old. When I went to get my pass book made, they told me to get my age
corrected on the notice. I went back to them two days later and they said if you pay us Rs 50 ($2), we will get the age corrected. Then they asked me to pay them this bribe after two days. My school examinations mark-sheet says I am 23. I have got certificates that have my date of birth and yet I am being harassed in this manner.

interview with Abdul Jabbar, age 36, resident of Rajendra Nagar

I am the governor of the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan. I am a gas victim myself; my father died because of the gas. We in the Sangathan are fighting against a killer multinational and an apathetic government. Union Carbide is trying its best to evade accountability for the genocide it has committed. It is trying to wriggle out of the situation by using its wealth and its political power. The new government at the Centre seems to have taken a strong stand against Union Carbide. But the government has yet to take effective action for medical treatment of the gas victims. We have long been asking the government to set up a Medical Commission on Bhopal. The Medical Commission would concentrate on evolving a proper medical treatment for the gas affected people. The Commission should also look into the medical categorization that the Directorate of Claims has done. The government has to provide opportunities for people to become self-dependent.

People outside Bhopal seem to have forgotten the gas disaster. Earlier a lot of concern was expressed for the Bhopal victims but now that seems to have died down. Even today hundreds of thousands of the gas affected people continue to suffer from gas-related illnesses and people are still dying painful deaths. Yet most people seem to believe that the Bhopal issue is over. This is indeed unfortunate.

ENDNOTES

1On March 29, 1985, Indian Parliament passed the Bhopal Gas Tragedy (Processing of Claims) Act. This Act established Government of India as "parens patriae" of the gas victims, establishing a guardianship relationship wherein Government of India was given full responsibility for the welfare of all gas victims. Toward fulfillment of this
responsibility, Government of India was granted sole right to represent victims before the courts. Government of India retained final decision-making power regarding disbursement of the amount granted by the court. Clause 11B of the Act specifies that the central government may determine the total amount of compensation apportioned for each category of claim. Now that preparations are made to begin disbursement, the central government must now fulfill their responsibility to determine the means which will maximize the welfare of all gas victims.

On October 3, 1991, the Supreme Court validated the $470,000,000 settlement between Union Carbide and Government of India. The judgment re-opened criminal proceedings against Carbide management personnel. The government was ordered to make up for insufficiencies in the settlement amount. The Court did not, however, contest the way that the government had categorized victims and thereby denied the magnitude of their responsibility.

The government has also been ordered to make arrangements for disbursement of the compensation amount by appointing Claims Commissioners and setting up Claims Courts by February 1992. The disbursement of compensation is a major task and under the prevailing conditions extremely complicated. The first major problem is the absence of a registry of gas victims, particularly since there has been no governmental effort to monitor the migrations that have taken place in and out of the gas affected areas. The second major problem is the lack of any scientifically valid criteria for the evaluation of personal damages. Along with the problems of identification of gas victims and the allocation of compensation amounts commensurate with the damages suffered by individual victims, the third major logistical problem is corruption.

On October 3, 1991, the Supreme Court upheld a settlement of the Bhopal case for $470,000,000. The judgment did not specify how this money was to be distributed. It was indirectly indicated that disbursement would be according to the Medical Categorization Data provided by the Madhya Pradesh Government. The quality of this data has been severely criticized by a broad spectrum of medical professionals. The data is not based on sufficient diagnosis or laboratory tests. As consequence, the results are un-representative of the severity and distributions of injury among gas victims. Out of a gas affected population of over 600,000, only 40 individuals have been categorized as permanently disabled. Further, in J.P. Nagar, a severely affected area, only 49 people are categorized as "C", permanently injured. Meanwhile, Kotara Sultana Bad, an unaffected area, has 56 people categorized as "C". Clearly, if the Medical Categorization Data is used as the basis for disbursement of compensation, there will be few beneficiaries and they will not be those most in need.

Further, if the Medical Categorization Data is used as the basis for disbursement of compensation, it will be necessary to establish a system of courts in which victims can verify their categorization. These courts will be extremely costly to set up and operate, will cause great delay in the disbursement process and will attract corruption at all levels. The money saved from construction of court buildings and salaries of employees could be used for rehabilitation of gas victims. Past experience with the disbursement of interim relief also shows that 44% of the notices issued by the government were returned. There are more than one lakh gas victims who still are not getting this relief. These figures indicate a serious problem with the method of contacting and identifying claimants. Claims Commissioner Courts would worsen this problem by instituting new delays and higher levels of corruption.

The voluntary sector in Bhopal has been unequivocal in insisting that the Medial Categorization not be used as the basis of compensation disbursement to gas victims.
BGPMUS has insisted that the only fair alternative is immediate, equal distribution to all those living in the 36 wards designated as gas affected by the Indian Council of Medical Research. Only through equal disbursement can compensation reach victims with minimum delay and minimum disruption of their lives.

A study conducted by Medico Friends Circle (MFC) in 1985 documented the impact of gas exposure on reproductive disorder. In non-pregnant women, the most pervasive problem was cyclical irregularities, particularly shortened cycles with excessive bleeding. There also was significantly high incidence of pelvic inflammatory disease and excessive vaginal discharge without local factors being responsible. Suppression of lactation also increased.

Among pregnant women, there was change in fetal movements and a trend of post maturity and prolonged labor. Most alarming, however, was the significantly increased incidence of spontaneous abortion and still births: before the gas leak, the fetal death ratio was 6.43; in September '85, the fetal death ratio was 31.25. Spontaneous abortion was shown not to be confined to the immediate post gas period but continued in high incidence even ten months after exposure. Further, high incidence of abortion was not confined to those pregnancies conceived before exposure; spontaneous abortion in conceptions after the leak were five times higher than before.

Since 1985, no research has been carried out which primarily focuses on reproductive disorder. However, random interviewing in the gas affected community indicates that the problems documented in 1985 persist, including a high incidence of fetal death. Interviews also document the incidence of recurrent birth defects which may be gas related.

Research biases against women have been a consistent problem in ICMR reports and in data collection to determine compensation. In their 1990 report, MFC states that "in the processing of claims, gynecological problems have not been given adequate weightage. ICMR has in fact categorically stated that they do not have any evidence to show that an increase in dysfunctional uterine bleeding, chronic cervicitis, non-specific leucorrhoea and pelvic inflammatory disease is gas related." In Government of Madhya Pradesh Medical Categorization, direct neglect of research on gynecological problems has been furthered by an evaluatory approach which hierarchically ranks primary body systems and thus both ranks fertility problems very low and denies the significance of multisystemic indicators.
SECTION TWO:

ADVOCATING "BHOPAL," CHALLENGING HISTORY, SCIENTISM, AND THE DISASTERS OF WALL STREET

preface

The advocacy of this section is in the introduction and conclusion. The middle segments are like the appendices one would attach to legitimate the argument. The introduction argues not only that there are conflicting versions of the Bhopal Disaster, but also that the different versions can be classified in congruence with different economic models. My decision to work with economic models derived from two directions: 1) Within Critical Legal Studies, tracking economic bias in supposedly neutral discourse has been an effective way to show conflicts of interests. 2) As a mode of writing, advocacy needs to be highly classificatory so that comparisons can be drawn; as Weber demonstrated, ideal types are useful to establish relationships even though they cannot offer complete representations.

INTRODUCTION

August 15, 1947. Indian independence. Freedom at midnight. It was to mark the end of times when outsiders ruled India, when inequality was sanctioned by the Queen's white skin, when Kipling's Eurasians were the greatest moral threat to Mother England. Union Carbide was to bring science to India, the Green Revolution, socialism and democracy. Has history held? Has the dream been realized?

India's independence dream of socialism and democracy is caught by history, held by a rhetoric that claims to represent the whole world with scientific legitimacy. It is a history which marks Third World development with the GNP, by the number of medical doctors rather than by female mortality rates, by foreign investment which allows Pepsi to monopolize the agricultural sector. It is a history which blacklists India for breaches of international patents through a natural logic that equates "free trade"
with the moral good. It is a history that allows Union Carbide to accept "moral responsibility" for the Bhopal disaster, but no liability.

Conventional historiography does not account for disasters. They are externalities which are omitted from official balance sheets, lost in a rhetoric that cannot speak of unequal distribution of the risks and benefits that accrue through industrial growth. Advocating Bhopal thus requires an interruption of conventional historiography, changes in the ways we chart progress and the ways the past is used to mark the future.

The challenge of advocating Bhopal has been taken up by gas victims, former plant workers, health professionals and others. The overall attempt has been to track the parameters of the disaster beyond the two hour interval in December 1984 when 40 tons of methylisocyanate was released over the city of Bhopal. This has included worker documentation of negligent management in the plant in the years preceding the disaster, critiques of health categorization of victims for methodological bias and critiques of the law which connect the institutional structure of the courts to international processes of political economy.

Oppositional accounts have responded to the claims of gas victims that the mainstream press, Union Carbide and the Government of India have all represented the Bhopal case as an isolated event, without source and finalized by distribution of cash compensation. Gas victims argue that there has been an overall attempt to encapsulate, all within the logic of the market. Opposition to corporate and official handling of the Bhopal case can be understood as a multi-faceted challenge to this encapsulation.

The arbitration set up is between an understanding of the world sustained by a logocentric, progressive conception of history carried by sovereign individuals and legitimated by scientism versus understanding sustained by a reticular logic which continually connects things which once seemed separate, including individual social actors. The latter conception of history is legitimated by an ecological politics that understands economism as only one aspect of the whole.
Focus on different ways to "remember Bhopal" shows how historical representations are shaped by the assumptions of different economic models and then are legitimated by different conceptions of science. The different histories documented here carry six different models of understanding how the global economy does and should work. The purpose of differentiation is not only for analytic clarity but also to show that neither power nor its opposition is monolithic. Recognizing the fractures within power provides an itinerary for challenges on power's own terms. Challenges that show empirical, logical and moral inconsistency. Recognizing the fractures within opposition foregrounds the need for collaboration and warns of the possibility of division and rule.

The models traced can be identified in terms of logic and in terms of the interests they sustain. The history told by Union Carbide carries a market model which legitimates global monopoly and flexible accumulation with efficiency arguments. The history told by the Government of India carries a corporate model of command economy that legitimates industry/government alliances as a means to attract foreign investment. Media coverage generally assumes a market model with competition on a national scale. This model both allows for easy categorizations needed for journalistic representation and elides the ways media neutrality is coopted by international monopolization of the media industry itself.

The history told by victims of the Bhopal disaster carries a feminist economic model which both critiques the homogenization of interests within victimized sectors and insists on a relational, gendered conception of individual well-being. The history told by workers follows a Marxist model which stresses the need for worker control over production and the need for a strong, regulatory state. The history told by middle-class activists carries a green economic model which challenges patterns of growth and consumption as part of an agenda for local, community based political decision-making.

Detailing these different histories is a way to challenge both conventional understandings of societal development and the changing context in which development
planning must now occur. Flexible accumulation and crisis management have changed both the ways power operates and the ways opposition must respond. There are implications both in economy and culture. Workers and communities are materially affected by the continual threat of job loss and by the hazards created by plant shutdowns. Simultaneously, the means of resistance has become increasingly circumscribed. The chase for cheap labor has undermined the possibility of labor organization both because of the compromises required just to retain jobs and because of reliance on a new labor pool unaccustomed to union politics, particularly women and contract laborers. Crisis management has also spurred industry awareness of the need for control over public representation of their activities. Industry, governments and medias which support them have continued to rely on the legitimating rhetoric of science and efficiency, modernized by environmentalists claims.

**UNION CARBIDE**

In their annual meetings, Carbide always tells shareholders that the Bhopal tragedy is behind them, that a future of growth and profits lies ahead. Carbide's claim has the sanction of no less an authority that Judge Keenan of the New York Federal Court. Judge Keenan has presided over many important mass toxic tort cases, including the Agent Orange case involving Vietnam veterans.

In 1985, Judge Keenan dismissed the Bhopal case from American courts on grounds of "forum non conveniens," a dismissal which states that the proposed litigation could be more conveniently handled elsewhere. In his dismissal brief, Keenan argued that to accept the Bhopal litigation would be an act of "imperialism," that India must be allowed to "stand tall before the world" and determine her own destiny. No mention is made of American public interest or of the multiple ways that American corporations both cause and benefit from the failures of Third World development.¹

A forum non-conveniens dismissal carries three significant arguments. The first
argument is that the outcome of the proposed litigation is not relevant to the American public. The second argument is that "significant decisions" leading to the litigation were made elsewhere, implying a separation of parent company decision-making from the activity of subsidiaries. The third argument carried by a forum dismissal is that "due process" is possible in the alternative forum. By legal definition, due process is dependent on both the availability of infrastructure and on freedom from circumstantial bias. 2

Judge Keenan's claimed that the Bhopal litigation has no relevance for the American public by a forum non conveniens dismissal in May 1986. Yet, in August 1985, Carbide's plant in Institute, West Virginia leaked aldicarb oxide and methylenechloride gases, sending 100 people to the hospital. The Institute and Bhopal plants were built on the same design. In April 1986, OSHA fined Carbide $1.4 million for 221 violations of 55 federal health and safety laws for violations at the Institute plant. US Labor Secretary William Brock stated "We were just surprised to find constant, willful, overt violations on such a widespread basis." This statement and the fines came after 4 million dollars in improvements just following the Bhopal disaster. Later in 1986, Carbide paid 33.3 million in cash and credits to buyers of industrial gases for charges of price fixing between 1974 and 1980.

A "forum non conveniens" dismissal implies that significant decisions leading up to the case were made elsewhere, thus making it inconvenient to try the case in the chosen forum. In case of transnational corporate misconduct in the Third World, forum dismissals are a way to protect parent companies from liability. Carbide separated their liability not only by insisting on the non-integration of their corporate structure but also by blaming the disaster on a plant worker turned saboteur.

Carbide's sabotage theory was first fully presented at an independent conference of chemical engineers in London during the spring of 1988. The paper "Investigation of Large-Magnitude Incidents: Bhopal as a Case Study" was presented by Mr. Ashok
Kalelkar, a representative of the public relations firm of Arthur D. Little. Mr. Kalelkar's primary goal was to challenge the water washing theory put forth by journalists and by India's Central Bureau of Investigation, a theory constructed through the testimony of plant workers.

The water-washing theory states that around 8:30 on the evening of December 2nd, a routine maintenance procedure was carried out to clear blocked lines in the Relief Vale Vent Header piping configuration, downstream of the MIC storage tank. Despite Carbide's own maintenance regulations, the procedure was carried out without the insertion of slipbonds to keep water from backing up into the storage area. MIC storage tank #610 was not holding pressure so water was able to pass the pressure control valve into the tank. Carried with the water which flowed into tank 610 was iron rust filings from corroding pipe walls, residue of the salt compounds which had blocked the lines being washed and other contaminants. The entry of water plus contaminants into the MIC storage tank set off an exothermic reaction which caused catalytic trimerization, a runaway reaction causing massive rise in pressure and temperature that resulted in the release of the tank's contents to the atmosphere.

The water washing theory implicates Carbide management both for decisions immediately prior to the disaster and for long term processes of plant design, maintenance, and personnel training. In his refutation, Kalelkar insists that "salient, non-technical features" be investigated, requiring "an understanding of human nature in addition to the necessary technical and engineering skills." Kalelkar then refutes the water washing with a technical analysis grounded on the claim that "there is a reflexive tendency among plant workers everywhere to attempt to divorce themselves from the events surrounding any incident and to distort or omit facts to serve their own purposes."

Because of this reflexive tendency among workers, Kalelkar bases his investigation on the accounts of peripheral witnesses. A primary witness was an instruments
engineer who claimed that, on the morning following the leak, he noticed that the pressure gauge on tank 610 had been removed, leaving an opening through which water could have been inputted from a nearby hose. It took Mr. Rajan over one year to remember this detail, after which he was comfortably relocated to Bombay. The other primary witness was a 12 year old tea boy, retrieved after much effort from his native Nepal. The tea boy is said to have been on duty the night of the disaster and describes a tense atmosphere just preceding the leak, thus "verifying" that all workers on-site were involved in a conspiratorial cover-up.5

Carbide's sabotage theory pins the cause of the disaster on a five minute interval when a "disgruntled" worker attached a water hose directly to a storage tank filled with methylisocyanate. No mention is made of the reason why there were no safety mechanisms to prevent unauthorized inputs. No mention is made that, according to Carbide's own regulations, the tank should only have been three-quarters full and an adjacent tank empty to allow for transfers in case of emergency. No mention is made that there was no early warning system that would have tracked subsequent rises in temperature, indicating that disaster was imminent. No mention was made that four of five major safety systems failed to work due to indifferent maintenance. No mention was made that these systems were all underdesigned to accommodate mass escape of gas at pressures up to 720 pounds per minute.

MIC Storage tank #610 was contaminated with water but also with residue from the pipes through which the water flowed. Only due to these byproducts could the trimerization have occurred with the rapidity it did. Had water been inputted through a clean hose, directly to the tank, trimerization would have occurred, but over a much more extended time period. At ambient temperature, pure water would have caused violent reaction only after 23 hours. According to Carbide's own schedule of events, complete trimerization occurred within three and half hours time, between 10:00 pm on December 2rd and 1:30 am on December 3rd.
The water washing theory is upheld not only by accounts of a routine maintenance exercise that was carried out without proper safety precautions but also by features of plant design which allowed water to pass through vent gas headers made of carbon steel and through a pressure gauge made of copper tubing. In the absence of a slip bind, back pressure inside the headers pushed water back into the storage tank, carrying with it pipe filings from vent header and pressure gauge walls. According to Carbide's own description of the properties and requirements of MIC, it "must be stored and handled in stainless steel... Any other material may be unsuitable and possibly dangerous. Do not use iron or steel, zinc or galvanized iron, copper or tin." To cut costs, vent headers were nonetheless made of carbon steel; the storage tanks were pressurized with copper tubing. Thus, the cause of the Bhopal disaster was not a saboteur or even one, indifferent management decisions. The cause was in the plant design itself and in the corporate ethos of Union Carbide.

Nonetheless, the Bhopal litigation was settled out of court in February 1989. Carbide shares role $2, or 7%. That same year, Carbide doubled it's profits from chemicals and plastics business. According to business analysts, these improvements were not due to improvements in management. When shares plummeted just following the disaster, Moody's lowered Carbide's rating to the lowest investment grade. Their reasoning stated "fundamental weaknesses" in the firm's day-to-day business operations. Carbide's rise after the settlement was not seen as a reversal of this weakness but merely as a market correction, an effect rather than a cause.

One cause of Carbide's rise was a massive re-structuring in response to a takeover bid by GAF corporation. Resisting the takeover justified taking on huge debt to finance recapitalization. Financing the debt legitimated the sale of Carbide's entire consumer products division, immunizing the company from the threat of consumer boycott.

Another, less direct cause was a general market cycle that promoted the commodi-
ty chemical business. An analyst from Soloman Brothers was quoted in the New York Times as insisting that "the so-called turnaround at Carbide is a result of the improvements in petrochemical markets and not much more." The same analyst from Soloman brothers nonetheless described the settlement in euphoric terms, saying that "psychologically, it's terrific. Financially, it's reasonable. This relieves the pressure on Carbide and the stigma."  

Bud Holmes, Carbide's chief legal counsel in the United States was interviewed by the New York Times and he described the settlement as almost revelatory, opening a new world for its beneficiaries. He described work toward the settlement as "like walking up a pitch black, winding staircase, and you never know how much further you have to go in total darkness. Then, all of a sudden, it's light and it's all over."  

Holman's client got off for $470,000,000 and with no liability legally established. All but a small portion of the $470,000,000 was covered by Carbide's insurance. Estimates of projected rehabilitation costs are over $3 billion. And Holmes' only regret? Only that the case was not settled earlier.  

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA  

Carbide's sabotage theory was never upheld by the courts, but nor was it refuted. The omission, the failure to establish the truth, was institutional. At the micro level, there was the problem of the organization of the legal profession and courts in India. Unlike in the United States, law offices in India are not research institutions. Lawyers do not have the resources or infrastructure to establish their own facts. The truth is organized by the courts themselves. The courts themselves are an arm of economic planners. Economic planners provide the logic for governance in India, but also, both rhetorically and institutionally, play the role of benevolent Father, protector of the welfare of the masses.  

In March 1985, Indian Parliament enacted the "Bhopal Act," which granted the
Government of India the exclusive right to represent Bhopal gas victims in the capacity of p

erens patrie. Breaches of due process are implicit to the Act due to blatant conflicts of interests. While representing the victims, Government of India owns a substantial portion (22%) of Union Carbide, India stock and controls the courts, since judges are appointed and there are no juries. Thus, in the Indian proceedings, the Government of India has been plaintiff, defendant and the court.

The overlapping responsibilities of the Government of India has precluded the possibility of an impartial tribunal. This structural problem has been magnified by current political-economic trends. Since the early 1980s, the orientation of Indian development has changed. In the decades following independence, there was a persistent attempt to maintain self-sufficiency through minimalized dependence on foreign investment and technology transfer. This agenda did not provide adequate growth to keep up with the demands of a growing welfare state and increasing national indebtedness. Policy changes in the eighties redirected the economy toward greater utilization of outside resources.

The current dependence of the Indian economy on foreign investment has undermined the capacity of the Indian state to fairly evaluate the distribution of risks and benefits which accrue through industrial development. Because it is obliged to attract foreign investment, the Indian government is forced to let market considerations override all other concerns. It is thus impossible for the Government of India to fairly adjudicate the claims of those victimized by corporations fulfilling investment demands.

The implications of the conflicts of interests are clear. After the settlement was upheld by the Indian courts in October 1991, a seminar was convened to address the changing investment climate in India following liberalization of economic policy, following IMF guidelines. The seminar was specifically addressed to the legal issues pursuant to foreign investment and to the possible problems created by stringent tort
liability. The Bhopal case was specifically referenced, as was the Oleum Gas Leak Case of 1985, which established absolute liability for compensation of all injury due to negligence. The finalization of the Bhopal case served as verification that there is not as adverse a climate for foreign investment as it would appear. The seminar was inaugurated by the Union Finance Minister. The opening speaker was India’s Chief Justice Kania. The participants included the Union Minister for Law and the estimable Mr. F. S. Nariman, Union Carbide’s Indian counsel for the Bhopal case.

The complicity of the Government of India with Union Carbide’s version of the disaster has not only been passive, institutional. Soon after the disaster, it became known that police were dumping bodies in the river in an attempt to hid the magnitude of the devastation. Rajiv Gandhi announced that it was safe for victims to return home even before an official assessment was made. Meanwhile, it became known that food was being brought in from outside for officials and other elites. A hard green crust had appeared on the surface of stored food but no consideration was given to provision of alternative supplies.

The most obvious show of government complicity involved the controversy over administration of sodium thiosphate, an antidote to cyanide poisoning. Autopsies showed signs of cyanide poisoning; morticians themselves were overwhelmed by cyanide fumes when cadavers where opened. Physicians first administered sodium thiosphate to themselves; noting its effectiveness, they administered available supplies to victims. The result was immediate relief. Sodium thiosphate is not known to have negative side effects even when identification of cyanide poisoning is mistaken.

Carbide denied that cyanide could have been a byproduct of the MIC released. Despite their own doctor having recommended sodium thiosphate immediately following the disaster. The doctor retracted his recommendation, claiming that he was sleepy and confused when it was made. The Government of India conceded. A ceiling was set for administrations of sodium thiosphate; extra supplies were not made available. One
of the most brutal attacks on volunteers was a police raid on a clinic set up to administer sodium thiosophate. Police beat up health workers, smashed the premises and, most importantly, destroyed all documentation showing the antidote's effectiveness.

Since the disaster, the Government of India has worked for control, not remedy. Individual medical files were only released from the Official Secrets Act in 1991. Their contents are not structured for diagnostic response but for easy categorization of victims. Despite mass indicators of widespread and increasing morbidity, official categorization only places 30,000 individuals within compensatable categories. Health is understood as restored once an individual is labeled as "permanently injured, but not disabled."

THE MEDIA

The mainstream media in India and elsewhere in the world have conceded to the version of history put forth by Union Carbide and the Government of India. Media scholars have described the representation as "event centered." Little mention has been given to processes leading to the disaster, to similar processes elsewhere that could create similar disaster or to the ongoing repercussions.

However, a few committed journalists have played a vital role in extending the parameters of the event. Arun Subramanium did extensive investigatory research, resulting both in a co-authored book and in numerous articles in mainstream periodicals. In a 1985 issue of Business India, he made a major argument for parent company liability by establishing the intimate connection between Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) and Union Carbide India, Ltd. (UCIL):

from the fact that four senior executives of UCC's regional division, Union Carbide Eastern (UCE), including its chairman, were members of UCIL's board of directors. UCIL's budgets, major capital expenditures, policy decisions and company reports had to be approved by UCC corporate headquarters. The Bhopal plant formed an integral part of UCC's agricultural products division (APD), and was directly under the control of the director, APD, at the UCE headquarters in Hong Kong. The director, APD, in turn occupied the position of executive vice president at UCC. Thus the chain of
command stretched all the way from Bhopal to corporate headquarters in Danbury, Connecticut.

the Bhopal subsidiary:

1. 50.9% of UCIL stock was held by UCC.

2. UCC approved a site choice for the Bhopal plant which situated hazardous production facilities adjacent to already existing residential communities and barely two kilometers from the main railway station. The Bhopal plant fell out of compliance with city ordinances when, in 1974, it began manufacturing rather than simply formulating pesticides. As the twenty-first-largest company in India and employer of over 10,000 people, UCIL was sufficiently influential to override the city’s objections to their location through approval from central and state government authorities.

3. The decision to use and process methyl isocyanate (MIC) in Bhopal was made by UCC. From 1958 to 1973, the end product Sevin was manufactured without using MIC. Carbide switched to a MIC dependent method when it became the cheaper alternative. During the first years the Bhopal plant was operating, MIC was imported from the parent company. The decision to build a MIC processing unit in Bhopal was based on the need to "backward integrate" so that raw materials were produced on site, thus saving transportation costs and exploiting economies of scale. The context of the decision to manufacture MIC domestically was one of increasing competitiveness and industry decline due to local agricultural conditions.

4. The process procedure used to manufacture MIC in Bhopal was an open circuit process chosen, for economic reasons, over the closed circuit process used by Bayer Corporation. Carbide’s open circuit process required bulk storage of MIC and thus precipitated the storage management problem which led to the disaster.

5. Design of the UCIL plant and particularly the MIC unit was carried out and approved by UCC. Significant plant design features approved by UCC include the following:
a. Regulatory and alarm mechanisms at the Bhopal plant were manual and dependent on human detection. At a sister plant in Institute, West Virginia, control systems were automatic and computer monitored.

b. Storage tanks in Bhopal held 40 tons of MIC while Institute had small drum storage. An affidavit on the decision to bulk store was filed in the Federal District Court in Manhattan by Edward Munoz, a retired Vice President of UCC and Managing Director of UCIL during the design of the Bhopal MIC unit. Munoz states that UCIL personnel preferred a design plan for nominal storage based solely on downstream process requirements. UCC insisted on large-scale storage.

c. The refrigeration unit was too small (30tn) to help control a runaway reaction. Further, a water based brine solution was used as a coolant whereas in Institute a more expensive chloroform cooling system was used. The brine solution could have been a source of water contamination of storage tank contents.

d. In Bhopal, there was no means for continuous check of the purity of MIC. In case of failure in the final refining process, off-grade MIC would be mixed with previously stored material, introducing large scale contamination and danger. In Institute, interim tanks were provided between the refining system and the storage tank so that newly produced MIC could be checked for purity.

e. The storage tank was pressurized through copper tubing, making it possible for copper filings to be mixed with MIC. Union Carbide information on MIC itself states that copper can cause a dangerously rapid trimerisation, generating sufficient heat to cause a reaction of explosive violence.

f. Vent gas headers were made of carbon steel. In the absence of check valves, back pressure inside the header would push material back into the storage tank, possibly carrying with it rusted coating from the vent header walls. Carbon causes a catalytic reaction when in contact with MIC.

g. A jumper line modification was made in May 1984 to provide a standby in the
event that either the relief valve vent header or the process vent header needed to be shut down for repair. According to the Indian Central Bureau of Investigation inquiry into the disaster, approval for this design modification was given by UCC. The jumper line connected the relief-valve vent header to the process-vent header, allowing water ingress into the MIC storage tank. MIC in reaction with water set off the exothermic process which led to the pressure build up and release of gas into the atmosphere of Bhopal.

h. The vent gas scrubber, intended to neutralize leaks with a caustic soda solution, was built to handle a maximum pressure of 15psi. The rupture disk channeling gas into the scrubber was set to release at 40psi. Thus, even in circumstances of controlled flow, the scrubber could only accommodate 38% of the gas moving through it.

i. The flare tower, though purportedly part of the MIC safety system, was only designed for slow, steady burn off of carbon monoxide during phosgene (a component of MIC) production.

j. The water sprinkling system could not spray high enough to reach the gas. When the company fire truck arrived on the scene, it, too, was unable to spray water the 120 feet to the top of the vent gas scrubber, where the gas was gushing out.

6. Maintenance of the UCIL facility was overseen by UCC. This was demonstrated by periodic safety checks by UCC personnel. On at least three occasions, UCC safety auditors recommended the formulation of an evacuation plan for the residential communities adjacent to the plant. UCC was aware these recommendations were never carried out.

7. Quality and quantity of plant personnel was overseen by UCC. Worker manuals were produced in the United States and distributed in English. Senior plant personnel were given training at a sister plant in Institute, West Virginia; 80% of these workers left UCIL in the four years preceding the disaster due to low morale, partially caused by awareness that the Bhopal plant tolerated negligence and lack of safety consciousness. The plant's 1982 operational safety survey documented regular breaches of basic safety
rules and warned of the problems which could accompany staff reductions.

8. UCC financed and managed public relations after the disaster, first by shifting crisis management activities to corporate headquarters in Danbury, Connecticut and then by hiring Burson Marstellar, one of the largest public relations firms in the world.

9. UCC managed "Operation Faith", the effort to safely neutralize the MIC remaining in storage tanks after the major leak on 2/3 December.

10. UCC was the defendant in the Indian litigation of the Bhopal case; UCC was the party which negotiated and accepted the February '89 settlement; UCC provided nearly 90% of the $470,000,000 settlement amount to the Indian Reserve Bank (UCIL provided 45,000,000); news of the settlement caused UCC stock to rise $2 a share.11

The journalistic work of Arun Subramaniam and a few others has made a major contribution to both understanding and programmatic response to the Bhopal disaster. However, most media coverage of Bhopal has been like that of other disasters, bound by conventional definitions that understand disaster as an event that happens to a discrete community within a bounded time frame.

The mainstream press, Union Carbide and especially the Government of India have all represented the Bhopal case as an isolated event, without source and finalized by distribution of cash compensation. There has been an overall effort to encapsulate and exorcise, all within the logic of the market. Opposition to corporate and official handling of "Bhopal" can be seen as a multifaceted challenge to this encapsulation.

VICTIMS

The events of December 3, 1984 left Bhopalis shocked and keenly aware of their vulnerability. No alarm announced the presence of deadly gases in their homes. They woke, thinking neighbors were burning chili peppers. When it became impossible to breathe, they fled into dark streets. With no information on what was happening, they simply ran with the crowd, catching rides on passing vehicles whenever possible.
Families were separated; old people and children abandoned. Many ended up on the outskirts of the city or beyond, without money and only the company of strangers.

But it was only when the sun rose that the magnitude of the disaster became apparent. Dead bodies of people and animals blocked the roads; vegetation was yellowed and shriveled, the smell of burning chili lingered in the air. Meanwhile, Carbide officials had informed hospitals that MIC was like tear gas and could be treated with oxygen, antacids and water washing of eyes. Police were making rounds of the city, informing that the danger was past and asking people to return home. But no one believed them. Already there were rumors that the police had started dumping bodies in the river in a conspiratorial effort to hide the devastation.

When victims approached the Carbide factory for medical aid and information, desperate managers afraid of rioting suggested that another leak may soon occur. This set in motion a second mass flight and intensification of the uncertainty. People continued to die but there was no information on possible antidotes or remedies. Clearly the effects of the gas were not only temporary and there was increasing fear of long-term consequences. If they lived, would their sight be restored? Would they be able to breathe easily? How were they to earn a living if disabled? What about the effects on unborn children?

Immediately, however, a basic concern was food. It was not known whether the local water and food supply was contaminated. A hard green crust had appeared on the surface of stored food but police announced that washing and cooking would make it safe. Meanwhile, it became known that food supply from outside was being brought in for city officials and other elites. A helpless dread spread throughout the city, with people very conscious of their lack of control over the continued risks.

A slogan often repeated by gas victims is that "Bhopal is no isolated misery." Historically, this slogan exposes how the Green Revolution, which the Carbide plant purported to serve, was a major cause of agricultural labor displacement and migration
to the cities. Thus, many of those living near the Carbide plant had already been victimized by the same processes which culminated in their 1984 exposure.

The slogan also points to the victimization process which led to certain communities living in such close proximity to a hazardous industrial facility. The most affected colonies are among the poorest in Bhopal. They are situated just adjacent to the plant so residents were aware that "poison" was being produced because of the frequency of small leaks and routine emissions that caused nausea and other effects. They were never in a position to protest because they had illegally set up their houses, without land ownership or government permission. They continually feared that the slums, not the plant, would be relocated.

Even when union workers tried to mobilize their support in pressing for greater safety standards, residents felt the security of their homes as the greatest risk. They saw the workers as an elite group trying to protect itself. Ironically, in the elections just preceding the disaster, these residents were given "pattas" (land rights) by a politician trying to pull their votes. Later, trying to justify these grants, the politician insisted that he never saw them as a "final solution."

After the disaster, victims participated in a range of protests, coordinated by a range of groups, including the major political parties. The most sustained organizational outcome has been the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (Bhopal Gas Affected Working Women's Union). Today, the Sangathan is the largest organization of gas victims and the only one to regularly articulate victims' demands through public protest, press coverage and litigation. With a formal membership of 14,000 women, the Sangathan has been at the forefront of the struggle to establish Carbide's liability and to force payment of sufficient funds for rehabilitation. Over time, the Sangathan has developed an ideological and strategic program which demonstrates that sustainable response to the problems in Bhopal challenges not only the adequacy of government initiatives but also conventional understandings of "health" and "rehabilitation."
The primary fight of the Sangathan has been for restoration of local control through extended participation of community members. This has led them to challenge rehabilitation programs that require dependence on the government, hospitals that won't allow patient participation in the health care decisions, local solidarities based on communalism and other forms of political manipulation and family structures that curtail public involvement of women. The continuing challenge of the Sangathan is to evolve an organizational structure which can carry these commitments.

The initial mobilization of BGPMUS was to protest the closure of a Government sponsored sewing center which provided gas affected women with stitching orders. Many of the 600 women employed were widowed or had husbands incapacitated by the gas. Their average wage of Rs 320 ($7) per month was often the only income for an entire family. Hence, when the center was shut down in December '86, and job orders terminated, the survival of many families was at stake. Within four days, the women formed an organization and staged a demonstration in front of the Chief Minister's residence. Various collective actions occurred over the following months and, ultimately, the center was reopened and the demand was met for an increase in the number of women employed.

Since 1986, it has taken continuous pressure to keep the sewing center open. However, BGPMUS has also extended their commitment to a range of issues shared by gas victims. During the first few months of spontaneous organization, the most involved women formed a steering committee to coordinate activities. As the group began broadening their commitments they began to feel a need for male leadership. They felt a man would be taken more seriously, would have more experience and would have greater freedom of mobility. The latter became increasing important with the prioritization of legal struggle and subsequent need to travel to Delhi to present demands.

The man chosen to lead BGPMUS was Jabbar Khan, a gas victim who had earlier
been involved in the Morcha and with various relief projects in the colonies near where he lived. Jabbar has a charismatic style that quickly won the support of many women. Under his leadership, membership grew and issues became both better defined and more widely disseminated.

After Jabbar joined BGPMUS, women continued to meet daily at the sewing center and thus continued to have dialogue among themselves. They also continued to play a frontline role in labor negotiations, particularly in regular, spontaneous confrontations with quality control officials. These officials often reject stitching packages as a means of harassment. Women queuing to submit their own orders frequently become involved in heated exchanges in support of those being harassed.

Under Jabbar’s leadership, BGPMUS also began having weekly, public meetings at which Jabbar presided. These meeting were and remain a significant source of information for the gas affected community. Jabbar gives updates on the state of the legal proceedings, on health care options and on possibilities for income generation. The meetings also provide practical help for dealing with the relief bureaucracy, particularly the problem of claims processing for those who are illiterate.

The support system provided by the Sangathan is a significant alternative to the inefficiency and inhumane functioning of the state bureaucracy. This support system must be seen as particularly radical in its overcoming of significant demographic differences. Particularly, neither age or religion seem to have inhibited strong bonding. The women of the Sangathan have formed strong friendships that indirectly confront the tendency of bureaucracies to alienate and increase dependency. These friendships also play an important role in the women’s struggles with their families to allow participation.

Many of the Sangathan women have had to wage sustained battles at home to allow their participation in the movement. Many tell stories of husbands and in-laws not speaking to them for months because of their disapproval. Some, of course, even suffer
physical abuse. In such cases of family difficulty, Jabbar or a small group of women have often intervened. Their arguments about the real need for pressurizing the government have often convinced family members of the importance of participation. However, it is primarily women over the age of 35 that are allowed full participation.

Participants in the Sangathan are extremely committed to issues of justice and rehabilitation. However, most will also openly admit that one motivation for involvement is the opportunity to get outside the home. They enjoy the social aspect of the meetings, they enjoy being able to shout slogans in rallies and, most of all, they enjoy being able to travel out of Bhopal for rallies in Delhi or to rallies supporting other victim groups.

The most frequent excursion for Sangathan members has been to Delhi to protest the proceedings of the Supreme Court on the Bhopal case. This trips have tended to be extremely high spirited affairs, with the women clearly enjoying their unaccustomed freedom. When there has been a lull in the protest, women have often found the time to go shopping or on other outings into the city.

While in Delhi, women have also felt a clear sense of empowerment from their very proximity to places of power. Shouting slogans on the lawn of the Supreme Court has often felt like a real opportunity to voice grievances. However, the frustration of their issues being lost among so many others being voiced on the street of Delhi has often only increased frustration. One outcome of such frustration was a spontaneous incidence of property damage at the time the out-of-court settlement of the Bhopal case was announced. During a demonstration protesting the adequacy of the settlement, women participated in the bashing of Carbide offices. Most still see this as an appropriate response to their victimization and as a effectual use of their limited means of protest.

Experience has shown the Sangathan that whatever justice they get from the courts will not be because of the intrinsic fairness of the law or wisdom of the judges but because of vigilant pressure from those affected. Many observers argue that the successes finally received from the courts have been a direct result of the Sangathan's
sustained protest. Particularly, the granting of interim relief and the re-initiation of
criminal proceedings has been attributed to extra-legal pressure. However, all acknowl-
dge that the successes of the legal battle thus far have been limited.

The courts of both India and the United States have refused to make a decision
which would both publicize the gross negligence of Carbide and force them to provide
adequate funds for rehabilitation. Hence, BGPMUS's educational campaign includes
the argument that the government of both India and the United States have vested inter-
est in allowing multinational corporations to operate unheeded by the threat of ac-
countability for safety. Awareness of these biases drives these women to regularly
participate in street protest to publicize their cause.

Strategic prioritization of street protest indicates the Sangathan's lack of faith in
established institutions of justice and awareness of the deeply entrenched biases which
create and sustain victimization. However, the magnitude and urgency of the Bhopal
tragedy required immediate attention and thus compelled a dependence on the State that
otherwise would have been scorned. Because of the scale of devastation, there was no
choice but to demand government redress, despite clear recognition of the inevitable
problems.

To help offset problems with government inefficiency and corruption, a major
demand of the Sangathan is for establishment of a "National Commission on Bhopal" to
oversee rehabilitation programs. The commission is to be composed of reputable, non-
political persons and of gas victims. It is emphasized that due to the long term conse-
quences of the Bhopal disaster, it is important that there be a permanent evaluatory and
administrative body that is uninterrupted by the various priorities of specific govern-
ments.

The Sangathan has also stressed the need for a major re-orientation of past rehabilita-
tion efforts. They argue that past emphasis has been on individual recovery through
government support, an orientation which tends to produce both continued dependency
and stratification within the gas affected community. Instead, the Sangathan insists on programs which prioritize community recovery through support from the voluntary sector. Specifically, the Sangathan has demanded equal disbursement of compensation, income generation projects rather than cash relief and a decentralized health care system which maximizes patient control over the health care process.

Through emphasis on voluntary sector participation, the Sangathan has not only highlighted the inadequacy of government directed efforts but also challenged the validity of conventional models of redress. Most specifically, they have challenged the government definition of "health," "injury" and "disability". The Sangathan has never submitted to contractual concepts of compensation which comply with the notion that money can redeem harm. Further, the Sangathan has challenged medico-legal language of cause and effect which places the burden of proof of harm on victims. They have also rejected notions of health limited to the biological concerns of individual bodies. Throughout, the Sangathan has emphasized the need for organic regeneration of community structures as the best possible means of providing relief.

Acknowledging injury as an effect on the overall health of individuals and their communities compels an understanding of "rehabilitation" much more complex than would allow simple cash payments intended to be used for medical aid. One lesson of Bhopal is that "health" care is not simply a medical problem; health care must both attend to all life support systems and persistently work against the exploitative structures which conventionally sustain these systems. Medically, care must be taken out of institutions which keep control in the hands of experts and continues the disempowerment of patients. Such decentralization would allow patients to monitor their own condition and decide for themselves if the risk of medical intervention is appropriate. The education processes which are a corollary of decentralized medical care would also promote preventive measures and non-drug therapy.

The Sangathan's critique of conventional rehabilitation models has been sustained
and very radical. However, it has not been followed with the initiation of alternatives. The Sangathan has focused on agitation, not institution building. One reason for the Sangathan's focus on agitation has been an acute scarcity of resources, including information. Without full knowledge of the toxic potential of MIC, it has been difficult to imagine comprehensive medical care which goes beyond superficial relief. However, the many "action plans", including proposals for voluntary sector involvement, have never been taken up. One reason for this is the Sangathan's hierarchical organizational structure which caters to public representation of demands rather than to decentralized and cooperative management.

Jabbar Khan's leadership of the Sangathan channeled most resources into the legal battle. The cause of this orientation was probably reciprocal; in 1986, the litigation was at a critical stage and the original, women leaders of the Sangathan were not in a position to fully participate in the advocacy process. They lacked experience, confidence and freedom of mobility. Also, prioritizing the legal battle provided Jabbar with an opportunity to carry his leadership initiatives to Delhi and other places of power.

The importance of the Bhopal litigation cannot be questioned. There is an urgent need for sufficient funds for rehabilitation projects. Further, there is an urgent need to set a precedent which would have a strong deterrent effect on further corporate negligence. Such a precedent has become increasingly important with the rapid liberalization of the global economy and corollary emphasis on foreign investment. However, the limitations of legal initiatives must be acknowledged and it must be recognized that pursuing a legal battle requires organizational structures that often work against long term goals of cooperative and egalitarian community relations.

Prioritization of the legal battle has required that decisions on strategy be made by the few able to become experts on the legal issues. This has severely stunted the development of dispersed leadership throughout the Sangathan. Even members of the steering committee have had to be followers rather than initiators of activity. The Sanga-
than’s initial organization was ad hoc and addressed to local issues. Clearly, this allowed and even promoted the participation of women. Later prioritization of court struggle undermined this participation because of the need for expertise and diplomatic finesse.

Jabbar Khan has served the Sangathan well in their confrontations with the government through the legal process. Further, the urgent need for proper legal response cannot be questioned. However, it must now be acknowledged that the legal battle and other statist responses to Bhopal are showing clear signs of defeat. The courts have accepted an out-of-court settlement that exonerates Union Carbide of civil liability and consents to a compensation amount grossly inadequate for covering rehabilitation costs. Medical care through the state hospitals is corrupt and inefficient; drug treatment is merely symptomatic and often entails use of drugs banned due to their hazardous side effects. Housing and income generation programs have not brought any prolonged benefit.

The failure of statist responses to Bhopal suggests that rehabilitation will have to be an autonomous effort guided and sustained by the initiatives of affected people. Organizationally, this will require multiple leaders capable of decision-making that is both decentralized and coordinated. Strength will no longer be directed toward Delhi negotiations but toward the immediate concerns of the gas affected wards in Bhopal. The current challenge of the Sangathan is to develop this local collectivity and initiative.

Initiatives to localize the Sangathan’s work must not be confused with provincialism. In Bhopal, one of the greatest challenges is to establish that it was not an isolated or unusual event. The victimization in Bhopal was caused and is sustained by a complex web of national and international interests. No matter what success local institution building achieves, it will always be necessary to expose and agitate against powerful outside interests. However, this agitation must be locally grounded in ways which implicitly challenge both the content and allocation of knowledge.
The Sangathan's greatest initiatives toward a "grounded internationalism" has been through regular participation with other movements. At Saturday meetings, updates are always given on the struggles of other groups. There has also been regular attendance at rallies in support of the Narmada Bacho Andolan, Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh and Kisan Mazdur Sanghatana, an organization of poor farmers and agricultural laborers working in Hoshangabad district.

Also, in 1991, a delegation of women attended the women's conference at Calicut. At this meeting, they met women involved in the struggle against destructive tourism in Goa, for water rights in Rajasthan and against nuclear power development. Through the stories they heard, they both recognized shared issues and became more aware of how organizational structure implicates priorities. Specifically, for the first time, they were asked to justify their having male leadership and questioned about the priority they gave to "women's issues."

The trip to Calicut revealed enormous leadership potential within the delegation and also suggested great possibilities in education through networking. When Sangathan women have heard stories of others oppression from those oppressed, they have gained a macro-level critique without flight into abstraction and a sense of being overwhelmed. They have come to understand forces that cause suffering without "expertise" and reliance on theoretical concepts that hide as much as they reveal.

However, the Sangathan's education through networking has done more than extend the content of their knowledge. Because this knowledge has been gained through affective, horizontal relations, their understanding of how social change occurs has been de-expertized and de-institutionalized. This has significantly heightened awareness of their potential role in achieving transformation. History no longer seems a cheap puppet show in which a few wire pullers direct everything.

Education through networking has produced radical results in Bhopal because it has offered an alternative to conventional structures of knowledge production. Information
has been disseminated across horizontal relations of camaraderie rather than passed down through structures of authority, which even a televisions or a benevolent leader manifest. By challenging both the content and form of political knowledge, it has radicalized the personal identities of participants and set the stage for democratic collectivity.

Proper rehabilitation in Bhopal requires dramatic increase in community control. Yet, the only organizational structures familiar to most gas victims are the hierarchies of bureaucracy. Hierarchical decision-making cannot attend to the context specific needs of rehabilitation. Hence, it is important to provide gas victims with experiences which familiarize them with cooperative management possibilities. It is also important that gas victims continually extend their understanding of interconnected issues, particularly gender issues which highlight the political roots of personal problems, environmental issues which highlight the problems associated with "development" and electoral issues associated with communalism.

WORKERS

Workers, particularly T. R. Chouhan, who is writing a book on the subject, have emphasized the history of negligence in the Bhopal plant in the years preceding the disaster. Since the disaster, Chouhan has been a major informant for both journalists and official investigators from the Central Bureau of Investigation. He has also participated in two conferences addressing industrial hazards and human rights in the United States. Using his access to eyewitnesses in combination with his own experience, Chouhan has carried out a vigilant campaign to protect his country from what he calls "the multinational cancer." His book, Inside the Killer Carbide Plant is the culmination of these years of research and commitment. 12

Chouhan challenges the sabotage theory with detailed documentation of the safety lapses, maintenance failures and general negligence in the plant since he was hired in 1979. His book attempts to breach the claim that the cause of the disaster was one, non-
management person's activity in an interval of less that five minutes. Chouhan insists that the "whole story" has more of a history, both within the plant itself and within the broader processes of transnational capitalism.

Generally, Chouhan situates Carbide's activity within a changing market for chemical agricultural inputs. When the MIC unit was set up in Bhopal in 1979, a plant design was adopted which allowed bulk storage. This was done in anticipation of selling MIC produced in excess of their own formulation requirements to other suppliers of MIC based pesticides. Clearly, this indicated expectation of a huge growth in demand, as no doubt promised by FAO officials, especially since MIC based pesticides were being promoted as "environmentally sound." It was not anticipated that farmers would be disillusioned by the cost or by increased crop vulnerability to new pests. It was not anticipated that there would be famine years in which farmers were simply unable to produce the cash necessary for purchase of chemical inputs. No one expected the spread of small pesticide producers who relied on cheaper components.

The Bhopal plant was licensed to manufacture 5,250 tons of MIC based pesticides. However, peak production was only 2,704 tons, falling to 1,657 tons in 1983. In 1984, the Bhopal plant manufactured less than one quarter of its licensed capacity. UCIL was thus directed by Union Carbide, Hong Kong to close the plant and prepare it for sale. When no buyer was available in India, plans were made to dismantle the factory and ship it to another country. Negotiations toward this shut down were completed in November 1984.

Chouhan's book includes graphs showing the connection between the changing market context and the management decisions leading to the disaster, retelling the oft told story of how corporate loss is externalized and the risk burden borne by workers and communities. Chouhan's documentation of intensified personnel reduction runs a parallel chronology to Carbide's plans to relocate.

It was not, however, only after dramatic losses that conditions at the Bhopal plant
were unacceptable. Chouhan reports that, as early as 1978, workers joked that "anything could happen in this plant." The event which provoked this remark was a fire in the plant during which the company fire truck was sitting up on a jack with all tires removed. The company "managed" the fire by removing outspoken union leaders and entertaining government officials at posh hotels.

THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Voluntary efforts to combat the suffering and uncertainty in Bhopal came quickly. Initially, organization was completely ad hoc. Despite their exhaustion and sickness, victims themselves showed extraordinary resourcefulness and compassion. They were joined by outsiders who flocked to the city to render any assistance possible. Within days, the Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangharsh Morcha was formed to coordinate these efforts.

The Morcha brought together activists from diverse backgrounds. Local people worked alongside professionals, academics, trade unionists and others in a mammoth effort to respond to the urgency of the situation. In so doing, however, the Morcha did not simply prioritize relief and relegate critical perspectives to secondary importance. From the start, the Morcha was as concerned with means as with ends. There was continual attempt to evolve a democratic organizational structure, with particular attention to the role of local people and women.

Further, the Morcha took a very critical stand on "Bhopal" as an issue in the ongoing debate about the role of technology in the development of Indian society. The Morcha represented the disaster as the outcome of economic planning which prioritized high speed growth and imagined bureaucracy as the appropriate response to unequal distribution of its benefits. Perhaps most significantly, they questioned the ability of technology to solve problems of its own creation. The Morcha worked on the line that there can be no true rehabilitation or justice in Bhopal, that there are "no technical solu-
tions to social problems."

The Morcha's exposure of government culpability was not, however, limited to a critique of planning orientations. The Morcha also exposed the very direct blame of local officials in allowing Union Carbide to be operated so negligently and so near residential colonies. They also exposed the inefficiency and corruption of official relief efforts, publicizing the government's attempt to avoid welfare responsibilities through overall denial of the magnitude of the problems. However, the Morcha recognized that the voluntary sector could never provide more than a modicum of the required services and thus engaged in a demand campaign to push toward the greatest possible government accountability.

Accountability requires information yet access to information continues to be a fundamental problem for all voluntary sector initiatives. The first publication of the Morcha warned victims not to believe government claims about the safety of the food and water supply and demanded greater access to substantive information. This demand remained central throughout the Morcha's work, particularly regarding medical care. The Morcha's vigilance on the information issue emerged from an encompassing "institutionalization of silence" that immediately followed the disaster. The clamp down on information reached from the highest officials to the ward nurses at government hospitals. One doctor, when queried about the extraordinary rate of spontaneous abortion, told volunteers that, officially, he couldn't even tell them his own name.

Due to lack of information, planning voluntary initiatives has often been based on circuitous logics that bring together issues that would otherwise seem separate. An important instance of this has occurred with women's health issues being understood as both indicative of more general health issues and emblematic of the inadequacy of response. In the months following the disaster, the rate of spontaneous abortion and high incidence of menstrual disorder became a matter of great concern among volunteers. It indicated that toxins were residing in the body and could pass the placental
barrier. This substantiated the fear of long term and multi-systemic effects. When the abortion rather remained extraordinarily high even one year after exposure, it came to be understood as a marker of chromosomal aberration and the possibility of long term effects like cancer. This understanding was verified by an 1990 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association.*

Despite the frustrations, many activists have remained committed to work on the issues of Bhopal. The orientation of this commitment was seen at a national convention, held in Delhi April 8-9, 1991. The "National Convention on Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster and Its Aftermath" was organized to revitalize awareness and support for voluntary sector work. Participants included journalists, trade unionists, representatives of political parties and activists from a range of people's struggles.

The meeting was divided into three sessions addressing the February '89 settlement, rehabilitation and legislation regarding hazardous industry. Final discussions formulated resolutions to be presented to the public and an action plan specifying required initiatives by convention participants.

The session addressing the February '89 settlement between Union Carbide and Government of India focused on the inadequacy of the $450,000,000 settlement amount due to its grounding in gross underestimates of rehabilitation needs. Particular attention was given to the medical categorization data provided by the Madhya Pradesh Government. This data indicates that out of a gas exposed population of over half a million people, only 40 individuals need be considered permanently disabled. Participants agreed that the medical categorization data was produced for political rather than practical ends; it was emphasized that denying the magnitude of rehabilitation needs was part of Government of India's effort to lessen liability charges against Union Carbide, thus legitimating the February '89 settlement.

The session addressing rehabilitation issues questioned the role of the state, the responsibilities of the voluntary sector and the possible function of a National Commis-
sion on Bhopal. It was proposed that an autonomous National Commission be formed to guide research and information dissemination efforts and to oversee rehabilitation, including medical, income generating and housing programs. The commission would be comprised of reputable, non-political persons with expertise in relevant areas and of gas victims; the commission would be answerable to Parliament. It was argued that to correct the problems of past rehabilitation efforts, the Bhopal commission must redirect past emphasis on individual recovery through state support and prioritize community recovery through support from the voluntary sector. Toward this end, suggestions were made toward institutionalizing victim participation in decision making and for building of non-exploitative collectives.

The session on legislative responses stressed the need to change economic policies which promote investment into hazardous industry, particularly those operated by multinational corporations. It was recognized that while increased regulatory supervision of hazardous industry could lessen the degree of risk, it can not restore the democratic right of communities to control the decisions affecting their lives. Honing of institutional controls of risk was thus seen as important but secondary to a commitment to overall risk reduction through minimalization of polluting industries.

The most pressing demand articulated by the Convention was that the settlement be overturned and Union Carbide made subject to the continuing jurisdiction of the courts. This would require a reversal of the "full and final" clause of the settlement which bars further legal action against Carbide. It was emphasized that introduction of a legal category of "continuing liability" is the only way to ensure sufficient funding is available to care for victims of toxic exposure, particularly when the long term effects of exposure remain undetermined.

The conference concluded with a powerful statement by Praful Bidwai, a noted Delhi journalist. Commenting on his reporting experience, Bidwai stressed that "Given the limitations of state intervention and technology based solutions, we must ask if there
is a different way of organizing society. Within the existing structure of state, there is an
accepted notion that certain processes are excessively toxic in relation to conceivable
benefits. We must extend the logic. Nuclear power as a means of electricity. Cyanide
as a means to electroplating. Sevin, Temik as pesticides. Technology must be differenti-
tiated. We must disallow Capital's domination of social considerations."

CONCLUSIONS

Bhopal can be designated as a marker of environmental politics which defines
areas for immediate attention in the effort to make environmentalism a coherent politi-
cal strategy. Historically, Bhopal coincides with the rise of grassroots politics in India
and the rest of the Third World. In the aftermath, there were great extensions of envi-
ronmental regulatory structures in the First World, particularly through provisions
which provided for greater citizen participation through the right-to-know about indus-
trial hazards.

Structurally, Bhopal has required collaboration, both of social actors and of dif-
ferent theoretical programs. Responding to Bhopal has crossed class, national and
ideological borders. It has also brought together social issues which once seemed sepa-
rate. International trade patterns have been connected to the circumscription of social
movements, health care models have been connected to bias in science education, envi-
ronmentalism has been connected to race, class and gender.

This positioning of Bhopal responds to various calls for social transformation that
recognize the limitations of single issue politics. It also contextualizes environmental-
ism within a new political-economic and cultural space. "Bhopal" suggests the ways
that the issues of environmentalism mandate a new style of international politics that
take into account a general perception of the failure of old blue prints for change, par-
ticularly those based on the Soviet model.

The new politics recognize the "circle of poison" wherein remedy for social prob-
lems cannot be legislated within national borders. They also recognize the changing authority of nation states due to the increasing power of transnational corporations and the emerging authority of non-profit, non-government organizations. It remains to be seen how non-government organizations will participate in the new political arena, how they will define themselves and how they will be defined by the legal, bureaucratic context in which they work.

Strategizing the role of new political organizations will require legislation and litigation, including that which restructures international organizations like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Health Organization. It will also require fundamental changes in the structure and production of the university.

Structurally, the university must recognize that traditional disciplinary organization does not allow for connection of issues or for the methodological diversity required for response. Substantively, the university must renegotiate the divide between scholarship and politics.

Throughout much of academia, direct advocacy is not considered intellectually rigorous. It is condemned for failing to see the complexity of the world, for failing to acknowledge the crisis of representation implicit to language and for failing to carry a fashionably tragic sense of history. This bias must be interrupted for practical reasons. It can be legitimated on the very terms which challenge it.

Contrary to conventional academic understanding, advocacy is particularly intellectually sensitive because it acknowledges ontological heterogeneity, an understanding that the world is shaped, experienced and represented in many different ways. Through the acknowledgement of ontological heterogeneity, advocacy becomes emblematic of postmodernism both as history and as mode of representation. Modernists writers such as Faulkner and Sartre asked "how it is that we know what we know?" Advocacy, following the path of writers like Borges, Pynchon and Fuentes, asks "which world is this that we propose?"
Advocacy understands science as a process of adjudication through which truth is constructed through valuation. This is opposed to an understanding of science as a value-neutral endeavor which tracks history as progress toward the Capital, where everyone, naturally, wants to go. The latter conception of science is sanctioned by Capital Logic, the former by an ecological logic which admits that value is coined by separation.

It is true that advocacy is a persistently exclusive form of writing. It consistently asks what must go, both from the social order and from the text. But it is an exclusionary process that recognizes specificity, differences within the social formations that mandate different institutional responses and require different communicative logics. Advocacy claims to write for an audience beyond the academy but it does not claim to write for an undifferentiated mass audience. A homogenized public, emptied of critical difference.

Advocacy writing is a mode of writing which carries arbitration, an acknowledgement of different conceptions of both the normative and the real. It is the best form of writing for programmatic intervention aimed at changing existing arrangements of the social order. It is a form of address directed to the courts, to policy makers and to institutions of cultural production, including the media and the academy.

Advocacy acknowledges cultures in conflict but grounds itself in the shared authority of syllogistic logic and constitutionalism. The task is to confront the ontology sustained by dominant communications structures with an alternative ontology. It is a game of synechdote challenging synechdote. An alternative construction of the social order is proposed in the language of wholism that belies awareness of the limitations of knowledge and planning. The disavowal is strategic. "Belief" in the blue print would involve a closure, an encapsulation process that is an instance of the very ontology being challenged. The language of wholism and authority is nonetheless necessary. Some audiences read only through syllogism, principled argument and resolutions
forged through adjudication.

ENDNOTES


4Central Bureau of Investigation - India, Bhopal Case Investigation Charge Sheet. (1987). The CBI Investigation was conducted with the help of former plant operator T. R. Chouhan, who is now writing a book on the negligence at the Union Carbide, Bhopal facility.

5Kalelkar, "Investigation of Large Magnitude Incidents: Bhopal as a Case Study," LCHEME Symposium Series 10.

6Union Carbide Corporation, Methyl Isocyanate. (1976).


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SECTION THREE:

IRONIC DEVELOPMENTS: INDIAN TECHNOLOGISTS, OUT OF CONTROL

preface

Much of the work we did in Bhopal was writing. Letters were written to newspapers, rehabilitation programs were submitted to public officials, petitions were prepared for the courts, pamphlets were prepared for activists at other sites wanting to participate in the "symbolization" of Bhopal.

The goal of symbolizing Bhopal is conceived by activists as a strategy through which disparate political issues become part of a recognizable configuration that carries an encompassing social critique. Carbide's pesticide plant in Bhopal was linked to other problems emergent from Green Revolution processes. The failure of state managed rehabilitation programs was linked to national health policy and to popular assumption about the curative effects of foreign medicine. Economic duress among gas victims was linked to general issues of unemployment and to the particular effects of trade liberalization and privatization. The agenda of "symbolizing Bhopal" is similar to that of Japanese writers on Hiroshima who insist that the bomb not only be remembered as an awesome technological achievement but also for its capacity for devastation.

Forging the connections necessary to "symbolize" Bhopal requires continual reflection and discussion. Thus, a primary source of field data for me was the casual conversation which filtered through our work and living. In the absence of an ideological blue print which demanded our strict allegiance, conversations often revolved around critical perspectives on reading which had been passed around the group. Dialogues were between members of our own household and with other activists working in Bhopal, particularly those working at Eklavya, an NGO which provides science curriculum to secondary schools based on Dewey’s pedagogical commitment to experiment and participation. We also talked with the steady stream of visitors who came from outside Bhopal, both those coming for short term projects with gas victims and
those working in nearby rural areas for which Bhopal was the state capital. Our most regular visitors from Madhya Pradesh were Socialists from Hoshangabad district, union organizers from the mines of Chattisgarh and activists from the campaign against the Narmada Hydro-Electric Project.

Because I choose to conduct my fieldwork in a deeply participatory manner, transcription of the discussions among activists was impossible. My goal was to share in the process of understanding and work rather than observe from a distant and neutral position. Thus, the interview recorded here is constructed. I have tried to mime both the form and content of actual conversations but have also taken editorial license in the focusing of issues. Such license is not only inevitable but part of the project to "re-patriate" anthropology so that cross cultural perspectives can become part of social critique at home.

Structuring my dialogue around readings of literature seems a good way to both materialize some of the ideas with which activists struggle and to offset some key oppositions:

- anthropologist/informant
- colonizer/colonized
- academia/activism
- scientist/literary critique
- documentation/interpretation
- theory/practice

These oppositions are negotiated both by academics and activists, sharing critique of modern compartmentalizations of knowledge. Like academia, activism defines meaning through a continual process of negotiation. Dialogue is a critical arena for both recognition of the structural determinants of meaning and of the ways meaning can be transformed through revolutionary practice.

Talking through literature should particularly offset the boundaries which establish that models of social assessment are scientific, or not, legitimate or ideological. The circulation of scientific theory and practice is a primary challenge for activists
because scientific progress is the overt "reason of State" in India. It is thus imperative to question the ways that scientific expertise operates both as resource and as a mechanism of exploitation. In forging oppositional political agendas, activists must both expose the disasters of science and capture the rhetorical and material artifacts of the scientific tradition.

The process of capturing science is both enabled and complicated by the fact that many activists are trained as scientists and technologists. Their social position provides the resources of critique through complicities that must be continuously acknowledged and undermined. Thus, these interviews give attention to the caste and class backgrounds of activists, to the emergence of their critique of dominant uses of science and to the ways these critiques are carried out in political work. The activists identified do not share a unified, anti-science position. The ethics and strategies of alternative science are vehemently debated and constantly modified by practice. This interview will describe a range of alternative approaches as they have merged in Bhopal and elsewhere in the Indian environmental movement.

The two activists (fictively) interviewed represent two ideal types, loosely defined. Rita is a Delhi based feminist politicized as a Marxist during her years at Jawaharlal Nehru University. She is trained as an engineer but has chosen to work full time in a women's group. Her family is Tamil Brahmin but she has resided in Delhi since she was young because of her father's military appointment. The language in which she most comfortably talks politics is English.

Pradeep is from Jabalpur, a small city in Madhya Pradesh. He trained as a medical doctor in Jabalpur and was politicized through work with local Socialists. He tried to mobilize other students to join the work but the university never became a locus of political activity. Pradeep's family is middle-class, middle-caste. Hindi is the only language spoken at home and is the language through which Pradeep thinks politics. Like many other socialists, Pradeep believes that use of the English language is complic-
it with the cultural structures which his politics challenge. Since university, Pradeep has been involved in a series of alternative health care projects and in the continual work against communalist hostilities.

Rita and Pradeep represent configurations around which the identities of activists cohere. Of particular note is the difference between activists trained and politicized in the cosmopolitan universities and those trained in regional colleges. This difference often marks a separation between Marxist and Gandhian perspectives. However, as the discussion should indicate, these identities are in a continual process of revision.

Traditionally, a political strategy shared by most Leftists has been to continually cross caste and class boundaries. The overall effort to build a democratic polity has involved persistent challenges to codified identity. These challenges have not been shunned but focused on as a means to refine proper roles. Such focus gains new importance as activists try to negotiate a new Leftism that responds to the new configuration of issues defined by environmentalism.

Environmentalism challenges Left identities in ways that question identity itself and the descriptive modes available to represent it. The challenge of building a green social model requires changes in the symbolic and the economic, the personal and the institutional, the local the global. These challenges are undertaken within awareness that the context of work is undergoing dramatic change. In response, there is ironic attention to the need for conventional descriptive representations. In the absence of a believable blueprint there is renewed attention to "the data," emerging from belief that honest documentation is the best way to expose crisis, both throughout the social order and within the Left itself.

Thus, one of the strategies emulated by this interview is a commitment to "completing the record." The goal is to describe in ways that situate knowledge and forge complex connections. The purpose is preparatory. As one activist told me, "honest attention to detail is the best way to know where we are and what options are available
to us. We must recognize that lack of information is part of what defines victimization."

**INTERVIEW**

Kim: Many activists have told me how much they like the writing of John Steinbeck. Can you explain the affinity?

Rita: In the *Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck tells of the tractors that came over the fields of Oklahoma. Great crawlers moving like insects. Straight down the country, through fences, through dooryards, over houses. Crushing the migrant farm workers. But the Joads had their old battered Hudson. It became the new hearth, the living center of the family. A means to the promised land of California.

This telling complicates the meaning of technology. It shows how technology structures human life, in both good and bad ways. It shows that the adoption of new technologies has a distinctive political cast. It also shows how technologies are embedded in larger systems than themselves. The Joads had their Hudson because the American economy had become consumer oriented. They were able to drive away from Oklahoma because of a highway system, built to provide jobs when the consumer economy turned in on itself.

Steinbeck questions the American faith that rapidly evolving material productivity will produce liberation. His stories show that mechanization in itself does not render obsolete the hierarchical division of society. Through description, he challenges crude utilitarianism and uncritical reliance on the alleged virtues of economic growth.

Pradeep: Steinbeck's critique of apolitical faith in technology doesn't prompt a sense that we must turn to statecraft. His stories are not didactic. They don't propose a political program. Instead, he relies on the reader, faithful that a true telling is the best way to provoke change.

His stories are rigorously empirical. They show connections and consequences. But analysis is left aside. He does not argue. He describes. The only theory is literary, an insistence that all descriptive identifications are situated, complex and changing over
time.

Rita: Steinbeck demonstrates catastrophe, giving new meaning to conventional terms in process. But he doesn't posit answers. He calls for change, but not through spectacular didacticism. His hope, I think, is that the reader herself will be changed by the telling, that she will know, differently. Much like the feminist hope that changes in the imaginary order will provoke real changes in the social order. Unlike Bolshevism, a spectacle organized by a few to be watched by the crowd.

Pradeep: Steinbeck's critique of technological society is Jeffersonian, a concern that the new modes of production will beget even greater subservience. Recourse cannot be through subservience to a political party or to any certain blue print. The consumption of new ideologies. Real change can only come at the point of production, through the facts that shape individual identities.

Rita: But Steinbeck does not equate knowledge and power. His commitment to "the data" is not a faith that democracy is only a matter of distributing information. His stories show that power is a matter of organization, that democracy depends on people's willingness and ability to work together toward common ends. Changes of identity are necessary so that this is possible.

Pradeep: Steinbeck's writing should be seen as preparatory. His stories aren't new myths, but the facts from which a new myth can be built. This attention to preparedness is not only because a new blue print has not yet been written. It is an acknowledgement that the revolution will never end, that there will always be structures of domination that must be resisted. The Joads reach Californian but it is not the promised land expected. There are new problems, requiring new means of resistance. Leaving is no longer an option. They can't go further West.

Rita: Steinbeck's characters are always east of Eden, never quite there. He makes analogy between the human condition and that of the tide pool, a natural order sustained by a continual fight of the strong against the weak. His stories show that humans are
not above these natural imbalances, that Bacon was wrong in assuming that humans will become masters of nature.

Pradeep: Steinbeck's is not a self-satisfied assessment. His stories are not a literature of despair, acquiescence to a tragic sense of history. His descriptions hope for shifts of power, just not through ideological virtuosity. The small stories he tells work as disruption, offsetting conventional equations of freedom, progress and happiness, offsetting History itself by reporting forgotten people.

Rita: Steinbeck was a biologist, well-trained in scientific method. He attempts to use his expertise in the best way he can. Empiricism is a legacy he clings to. But his is not a distanced objectivity. He orients his gaze with ethics, within an understanding that knowledge is contextual. His choice of subject, of focus, was self-conscious. Then he researched his stories by living among the people about which he wrote. But he doesn't claim to know his subjects better than they know themselves, like a colonial administrator. He simply reports what they say. And with a sensitivity to the dangers of voyeurism implicit to the writing task. His story "Bear" tells how harmful reporting the intimacies of others can be, even when done without maliciousness, only to make people laugh.

Steinbeck's allegiance to his forefathers is interpretive, not linear. He attempts to "complete the record," but taking a new kind of authorial position. He doesn't use the method and rhetoric of science to establish his own authority. The language of science is used to establish metaphoric links to American ideals of objectivity and freedom through which his readers approach his work.

Pradeep: Steinbeck positions himself as American by his choice of subject. He is American through his detailed writing about the suffering and struggles of migrant farm workers. Just as Japanese writers identify themselves as Japanese by writing about Hiroshima.

Rita: The Japanese writer Kenzaburo Oe says that by taking Hiroshima as the
focus of his thought, he confirms that he is, above all, a Japanese writer. Steinbeck takes migrants as the focus of his thought and thus become American. His stories carry many of the ideals for which American is famous, but read differently. Insurgency is how American culture becomes realized.

Pradeep: Steinbeck and Oe both represent disaster as a laboratory which demands our attention, as a testing place for cultural ideals. Empirically, disaster is the place where cultural ideals are most visible, both in their truths and their contradictions. Stripped of the veneer glossed by politicians. Strategically, disaster is the place where the logic of a system is pushed into crisis, insurgency on its own terms.

Rita: This way of national identification is perhaps our greatest affinity with Steinbeck. It reminds that we are Indian in our choice of focus, that our identities are not natural but constructed in accordance with our allegiances, with how we produce knowledge.

Pradeep: Oe argues that the new morality necessary to survive the nuclear age will draw on the wisdom of those who became interpreters of human nature through their experiences in Hiroshima. This is not a romanticization of the consciousness of the victimized. It is admission that knowledge is situated, created in the process of crisis.

Rita: Oe’s stories about the atomic aftermath make it clear that our expertise will not come from science alone. Science may be a way to the data, but only once it has admitted its own failures, admitted that it has caused devastation beyond its own descriptive capacities. The atom bomb is remembered as a scientific achievement. But only once its devastations are acknowledged can new challenges be taken up. The challenge of curing leukemia. The challenge of creating models of proof that admit statistical identifications. The challenge of a new logic which would account for the risks of nuclear power.

Science claims to seek new knowledge about the physical world. To fulfill the claims, science cannot ignore the disasters in which it is situated. Theoretical evasion
makes for self-reflexivity, a fetish for elegance that elides the proposed project. Science becomes a fancy dress party and the scientist gets caught by the spectacle of his own image.

It is only within destitution that science finds an agenda. A need and possibility for new knowledge. Science is thus dependent on the disaster, dependent on the structuring effects of crisis.

Pradeep: Thus, it is not only a matter of ethics that Indians must seek identity in Bhopal, and in other areas of development crisis. The very possibility of our own knowledge, free of Western impositions, will come through our response. To the extent that we deny the magnitude of the disaster, we deny the possibility of Indian alternatives to colonialist domination.

Rita: Bhopal has taught us that we are all are implicated. And not only by our consumption patterns. Middle-class privilege fed the process that led to the disaster, no doubt. But change can not come only through natural farming, a refusal to rely on chemical agriculture. If there were no pesticides, there would be other evils. So long as the middle-class refuses to position itself within the disasters around us. Accepting Fanon’s argument that real, post-colonial identity can only come through a shared fight.

Pradeep: The year following the disaster showed us how far we are from a shared response to our disasters. Despite the urgency of the situation, we were unable to work together. Unable to give up the ideologies which defined out visions yet kept us from mutual support. Unable to led the crisis itself fashion a new morality.

Rita: If we could have started with the disaster, perhaps we could have seen that our goals as well as our complicity are shared. Many activists share caste, class and even educational backgrounds. These affinities are forgotten in our attempts to distance ourselves from the privilege, holding others to blame. Yet, it is through our complicity that the problems can really be understood. By acknowledging our own positions, we see structure rather than isolated events.
Kim: Many activists in the Indian left are trained as scientists, engineers or medical doctors. Yet, a primary leftist critique is of the role science and technology has played in the development of Indian society. Can you explain how this comes together?

Rita: The irony is a structural one. Government allocation for education has been skewed to privilege the development of a technocratic elite. As a result, India has both severe underdevelopment, partially marked by an extremely high rate of illiteracy, and the world's third largest professional class. In 1981, there were more than three million Indian scientists, half of these living in the country and half living abroad.

Pradeep: But of those at home, about 20% are unemployed and the majority of others are in non-technical, administrative jobs. In 1981, only about 15,000 scientists were doing creative research. And this number probably includes the few of us officially unemployed, but doing "creative research" against the scientific establishment itself!

Rita: In India, as elsewhere, science is a mechanism of state legitimacy. Its purpose is show and control, not public welfare. We are trained as doctors to carry the authority of science, as emblems of India's progress. No matter that we have done little to improve the overall health of the nation.

Pradeep: The problem is not expertise itself but in the way it circulates. The problem is with the social and economic system in which expertise is embedded. Thus, by starting with acknowledgement of our own privilege, we break open a much larger critique. We come to admit that health is not merely a matter of physical care through expert intervention but a matter of structure. The appropriate response can not only be pharmaceutical.

Rita: Real response to the health crisis in India will require major shifts of both political-economy and culture. We must both allocate resources differently and coin a definition of health that is appropriate for the Indian context. By default, we have always relied on Western models. The efficacy of these models is unquestioned so even the most progressive political programs advocate simple extension. The contextual and
institutional requirements of Western medicine are never addressed. Nor are the side-
effects.

Pradeep: The ignorance is feigned. The problem is not that we are bound by
Western logic. The logic is a veiling mechanism that hides failures of political will.
Advertising the authority of science is a Machiavellian move which allows both scien-
tists and politicians to protect their social position.

Despite the rhetoric, actual health programs have been given meager support since
independence. Following colonialist emphasis on raising State revenue, planners have
seen physical health as expendable and broader, overall health as an impediment to their
goals. A populace with its own control over nature would have an organizational struc-
ture which could completely offset State sovereignty.

Rita: The bias is reflected in budget outlays. In the first plan budget, 3.32% of the
total outlay was allocated to health. In the seventh plan, the percentage had reduced to
1.88%. But even more striking is the imbalance between urban/rural and
curative/preventative expenditures.

Over 75% of the Indian population lives in rural areas. Yet, in 1956, when fig-
ures were first available, only 25% of all hospital beds were in rural areas. By 1974,
this figure had dropped to less than 15%. For the same period, over 65% of the expendi-
ture for provision of drinking water and sanitation was spent in urban areas. In all,
sanitation and other preventative provisions accounted for only 39% of total expendi-
ture.

Pradeep: These biases play to the way "development" is gauged by international
indicators. Resources go to urban areas because they become visible. Resources go to
curative programs because health care provision is figured by the number of hospital
beds. Components of the health care process are not gauged according to how they
work together but as separate statistics. The number of medical doctors is deemed
significant, no matter their functionality.
Rita: The most striking indices of health care being planned as an isolated endeavor to maximize State objectives is the dramatic increase in outlays for Family Planning. Under the first plan, family planning was a minimal feature in the total health budget. In the current, seventh plan period, family planning constitutes an incredibly high 95.97% of the health budget.

This extraordinary emphasis on family planning reveals both acquiescence to the West's agenda for population control and reliance on a Western, allopathic approach to the problem. Understanding family planning as an issue of control over an isolated phenomena follows the emphasis of Western medicine on cure of a specific disease rather than on preventative care of overall health. Despite clear evidence that the best way to slow population growth is to put resources toward women's education and economic upliftment. Such an agenda would upset models which believe context and assume that health is merely a statistical aggregate, gauged universally.

Pradeep: The first health plan after independence was based on the report of the Bhore committee. While the recommendations did recognize the need for decentralization through district level programs, it retained commitment to a universal schema. This was evident both in its recommendations for standardization of medical care between urban and rural areas and through assumptions that public health was dependent on the extension of allopathy. Implicit to this was a bias against indigenous systems of medicine and all other context specific programs.

Rita: Attempts to standardize health care provision on the Western model were recognized as a failure by the 1970s. Blame was primarily put on the insufficiency of trained health workers, which was exacerbated by the declining legitimacy of traditional health practitioners. So, in 1977, the Government introduced a program for training village based health auxiliaries who were to implement a combination of allopathic and indigenous skills. But the purported recognition of indigenous skills was really only an effort to re-legitimate traditional workers and accrue their efforts as part of the Govern-
Pradeep: The continued bias against indigenous medicine was seen in the training programs for health auxiliaries. The workers were not seen as holders of a knowledge system that could be tapped for greater provisions of health care, but as clean slates upon which new theories could be written. Knowledge about indigenous medicine was purely "anthropologic," for the purpose of control, not integration. This attitude toward traditional workers was even made policy by the World Health Organization (WHO). In a 1966 report, WHO recommended programs to increase the skills of traditional birth attendants because of the "repeated failure of legislation to prevent them from practicing." In 1985, WHO had progressed to the point of recognizing traditional practitioners "given the scarcity of modern health care personnel."

Rita: In failing to recognize indigenous medicine, India is not only blindly acquiescing to Western models but also neglecting the example of countries like China. China has benefited from allopathic medicine but in conjunction with traditional practices. Toward egalitarian distribution of health care resources, China now has over one and a half million "barefoot doctors" who offer village based services which combine the medical knowledge of allopathy, Confucius, and that of minorities such as the Tibetans and Mongolians. Chinese hospitals also combine different traditions of medicine, giving equal status to all practitioners.

Witness the comparison. According to 1989 figures in the World Development Report, India had 2520 persons per physician; China had 1010 persons per physician. Yet, female life expectancy in India was only 59 years, as compared to 71 years in China. The maternal mortality rate in India was 500 per 10,000 births; in China, it was only 44 in 10,000. In India, the mortality rate for females under five years of age was 134 per 1000; in China, only 31 in per 1000.

Pradeep: Chinese attempts to integrate different traditions of medicine has many lessons for India. It is clear that allopathy has not offered sufficient remedy. There are
problems of both resources and organization. Yet, we ignore possibilities within our own
tradition. In contrast to the Btore Committee’s recommendations for standardization,
ayurveda insists on the importance of context. The books of recipes for herbal remedies
are written for specific areas so that local material can be used for formulation. This
follows the dictum that for a person belonging to a particular country or region, Au-
shadhis from the same region are the most wholesome.

The emphasis on regional integrity is broadened by the insistence that shaastric
principles are not meant for mechanistic application. An important shokla insists that
"a vaiddya who comprehends the principles of Rassa would discard treatment if not
wholesome to the patient in a given situation, even if it is prescribed in the texts; on the
contrary, he would adopt treatments that are helpful, even if they do not find mention in
the texts."

Rita: A context specific approach to health would require more, however, than
simple belief in ayurvedic principles. Existing institutional structures available for
health care delivery would have to be radically transformed. Programmatic claims to
context specificity could easily become a veil for unaccountability.

The problems have already become evident within supposedly progressive pro-
grams. The Women’s Development Project (WDP) in Rajastan was initially applauded
for recognizing that the benefits of development were not reaching women. It’s charter
mandated that women be treated as equal partners in social and economic programs and
not merely as beneficiaries of the upliftment of men. Programs focused on the im-
provement of women’s self image and awareness of collective strength. Funds were
allocated for skills acquisition programs and health care. Policies were reformulated so
that benefits like loans could be directly available to women.

On paper, WDP seems to have a good agenda. But it wasn’t recognized that
development not only did not reach women but often directly entailed their exploitation.
It wasn’t recognized that there is an inherent contradiction in organizing people via insti-
tutional channels that themselves constitute the problems against which organization is necessary. How can you militate against the State when the State dictates whether or not you exist?

Pradeep: This contradiction became blatantly visible to WDP when it became evident that access to famine relief work was tied to the national program of population control. In attempting to meet their family planning targets, authorities would only admit women to relief projects who agreed to have a sterilization operation. The authorities' motivation was clear. For achieving 130% of their annual target, they were offered free air travel to Southeast Asian countries; for achieving 115% of the target, a colored television with remote control; for achieving 100%, a refrigerator. The motivation for local women was also clear. Wage work in times of severe drought and starvation.

The result was mass coercion, with some women being sterilized for the second and third times to fulfill targets. Many had severe post-operative complications due to the extremely unhygienic conditions of the makeshift surgery camps set up in the villages. Women who refused because post-menopausal or because they had not completed their families, were struck off the employment list. When, in certain areas, no "volunteers" came forward, whole relief projects were canceled.

Rita: What was WDP's response to this? All along, they had opposed family planning targets at the state level. How could they not when feminists across the country were emphasizing the coercion necessary for implementation? But when it came to actual confrontation with the authorities, the leadership of WDP backed down, arguing that the issue was not sufficiently significant to provoke withdrawal of funds for the entire project. A health team which had been convened to research the issue was disbanded. Project workers were made to take an oath to make the population control program a success. Salaries were stopped for two months when targets were not fulfilled.
Pradeep: The silencing of opposition to project directives was, and is, a clear duplication of the practice of an autocratic state. The mimicry was perfected with the use of verbose justifications that "higher" priorities of the national good necessitated such maneuvers.

Rita: Many committed activists got caught in the problems of WDP. In beginning their work, they thought that the most efficient use of their skills would be through the organizational structure of a government program. With time, it became clear that efficiency is never free of the biases which define it.

In conventional terms, efficiency arguments against the elite bias of development, including education, are probably the least important. They cite a management problem, not a cultural malady. The deeper problem is the ways that efficiency itself has become politically coded. Coded in ways which perpetrate elite culture and privilege.

Pradeep: The Indian method of developing human assets stands in contrast to that adopted in Maoist China, where education policy reflected the fear that merit based advanced schooling would nurture capitalist rationalizations of hierarchy. It also ignores Gandhi’s attempt to disrupt elite hold on Indian culture by emphasizing anti-intellectualism and the ethical superiority of folk Hinduism over the Brahmanic rites based on Sanscritic texts. Prioritizing elite, scientific control over nature is a logical extension of Brahmanic obsession with control over personal pollution. Thus, the religious fervor with which our parents push us through the technical education process.

Rita: The Indian fetish for science and technology has roots in both traditional, caste society and in the "American" faith that material abundance will automatically cure all social ills. Nehru followed this faith in his assumption that industrialization would alleviate the need for land reform and other challenges to Brahmanic control.

Nonetheless, despite these roots in tradition, Indian science has not acknowledged that the appropriate technology for us cannot merely mimic that of the West. The validity of large scale, capital and energy intensive projects is challenged in a milieu which
cannot provide required components, power, transportation and skilled labor. The management of economies of scale simply does not function in the same way here as in the West.

Pradeep: The aim of Western technology is to reduce labor and produce an ever increasing array of luxury goods. Indigenized in India, Western technology only exacerbates the alienation of the rural poor. Unemployment increases with automation and the existing elite consolidate their hold over both necessary and luxury goods.

Rita: Nehru's commitment to technological "self-reliance" was tragically ironic. Instead of promoting an indigenous technology which accommodated local conditions, his policies sought to indigenize foreign technology by pouring resources into research toward import substitutions, efforts to copy technologies developed outside. We thus play a comic game of chase, never getting the work done before it became obsolete.

Kim: Thus, even the elite space of research is circumscribed, caught by its own dependence on the West, both institutionally and theoretically?

Rita: Theoretical dependence is even more serious a problem than control through material resources. Accepting mainstream, Western notions of scientific reasoning not only doesn't serve us, but also blinds us, makes it impossible to recognize problems.

Pradeep: Nehru may have honestly imagined capital and technology intensive technology as the means to socialism. His failure may not of been in intent but in not conceptually connecting means and ends. This would have required a move beyond his famous "scientism," which he was incapable of. Scientism posits necessary development to a certain conclusion once conditions and variable are defined. What it forgets is the impossibility of such definition, that a new society is not built on a tabula rasa on which all parties can be equally contracted, once the law designates as such. Nehru did not recognize any need to be specific to the Indian situation, except in retaining Brahmanic control.

Kim: Do the critiques of Nehru's scientism lead to an anti-science position?
Rita: There are many different critiques, often coming from different ideological traditions. One task of the environmental movement in India is to collaborate the different critiques into a shared political platform.

Pradeep: Questions about the role of science and technology in the development of Indian society have been a part of Indian political discourse since independence. Popular discussion often opposes a Gandhian, anti-technology position to a Marxist faith in industrialization. Environmentalism has brought these positions into collaboration.

Rita: A primary tension within environmentalism is caused by the need to recognize science and technology as resources, both material and methodological, and as mechanisms which sustain environmental devastation and social inequality.

Negotiation of this tension has created vehement argument. There are anti-science positions which insist that science is authoritarian, both institutionally and in the way it organizes knowledge. There are arguments for an indigenous science grounded in Indian cultural and religious traditions. There is advocacy for the validity and scientici ty of the knowledge systems of tribal peoples. There are arguments for a "people's science" which would use mass educational campaigns to de-expertise scientific method as a basis for disruption of traditional structures of exploitation.

Kim: Can you give me an example of how these differences play out in practical efforts?

Rita: The People's Science Movement base their work on the argument that teaching scientific method to the exploited classes will allow development from the ground, up. They argue that this will both undermine traditional exploitative institutions like case and de-expertise technology, taking control away from elite interests.

Those who argue for more indigenous models of change see science as the carrier of imperialism and insist that "people's development" can only come through re-validation of local knowledge systems. These activists point out that the sustainable lifestyles
of tribals have been encroached on both by material appropriation of their resources by "scientific" development schemes and by the cultural legitimacy of scientific thinking, which labels their knowledge as superstition. They claim that commitment to science has diluted the People's Science Movement's commitment to the poor by keeping them from taking a strong stand on "failures of science," like in Bhopal, or in movements protesting the construction of nuclear power plants.

Pradeep: This division has been mirrored within medical care initiatives in Bhopal. There has been enormous conflict over appropriate means of intervention. One set of doctors insists that the push must be for state-of-the-art care on the western model. Their emphasis is on making resources now only available to elites available to marginal and victimized sectors. They want better government hospitals with comprehensive laboratory facilities and full availability of medicines, whatever the costs. These doctors are often those with previous or on-going ties to Marxism. To speak with them, you must join the long queue at some government clinic where they are trying to be functionaries in the slow building of a progressive State apparatus. These doctors are often very hostile to voluntary sector efforts as a diversion from this traditionally Left agenda. They also see praise of indigenous medicine as a fashionable excuse for continuing the deprivation of the lower classes.

The other set of doctors consider government hospital care continued victimization. They insist that allopathic medicine harms as much as it helps, particularly since its promoters are pharmaceutical corporations. They point out that even the diagnostic basis, particularly x-rays, are invasive. They also insist that the social relations maintained under allopathic care depend on expertization and thus sustain dependency. These doctors push for decentralized, community based care using local health workers and depending as much as possible on non-drug therapies such as nutritional supplements and exercise programs. These doctors try to avoid allopacy as much as possible and, instead, rely on the knowledge of both local traditions and indigenous systems of
medicine such as ayurveda and urani.

Rita: Disputes over appropriate means of health care occur not only among health professionals but throughout the environmental movement. The issues disputed are recognized as having broad implications which connect them to overall social critique. Unlike in the West, we can't codify environmental concerns around natural phenomena. Environmentalism has to be hybrid, a new politics emergent from a conjunction of social, economic and technological conditions. A politics which counters the claim that the organism as a whole is healthy, only in need of a few supplements. One goal of environmentalism is the preservation of nature, but it is important that we admit that nature does not itself provide a program for political action.

Kim: There are activists who want to find a moral paradigm within nature itself. They refer to the Earth as Mother, who knows all. The task is to listen. To respect women as natural carriers of ecological politics.

Pradeep: Naturalist arguments are to close to the functionalist logic of capitalism, the faith that an invisible hand absolves our responsibility to construct a social order we can live with. This faith is particularly dangerous within a context of rising religious fundamentalism. In the Indian context, alliance with nature is an alliance with tradition. Respecting the Earth as Mother becomes justification for flight from secularism, rationality, our obligation to construct an egalitarian society. There is little egalitarianism in natural processes, or in tradition. Diversity is preserved but only so that the big fish continue to have little fish to eat. Such is the agenda of conservatism, as a political program.

Rita: Conservationists tend to forget that natural models of the world are themselves human creations. Ironically, however, it is not the conservationists who are anti-science. Conservationists are elites who work toward ecological preservation with scientific models of assessment and response. They don't question the basic premise that humanity must dominate nature. Their goal is good management.
Anti-science activists position themselves on the other side of the political spectrum, as the most radical Left. Their radicalism is often defined as post-ideological, beyond the contradictions of Gandhianism and Marxism. A pure space with a language un-coopted by political compromise.

Pradeep: It is to similar to the nostalgia of Nazi Germany. A faith that flight from rationality will take us back to the homeland. A faith that the revolutionary can be a poet, caught up in a radical identity that ignores the facts of organized political power.

Rita: Arguments about the role of rationality in constructing the social good have been a consistent motif in Leftist discourse. Partly because so many leftists began their political work in the rationality campaigns, taken to the villages to rid them of superstition. We gave demonstrations showing the truth of science, showing how man can dominate nature if he has the appropriate method. But our arguments turned in on themselves, teaching us that rationality itself is an ideological construct, a language that makes sense only in certain contexts, a method with limited efficacy.

Pradeep: We had to admit that rationality could not become a universal knowledge that transcends social differences and allows consensus. Rationality may be learned but it does not displace other ways of knowing. The limitation is within rationality itself. Rationality knows through a process of distinction that creates a separate world of truth. There are no links through which it can interrupt tradition. Rationality is only true to itself so it can't critique tradition from within. Only full denial is possible, or a bilingualism that never translates from one language to the other.

Rita: We also learned to recognize the limitations of rationality as a method of understanding. Though a linear logic of cause and effect must be constructed to enter political debates, it is not a logic which can account for the complex interplay of forces which sustain oppression.

Pradeep: Recognition of multiple determinism is what distinguishes contemporary environmental activism from activism of the past. The logic is ecological, a strategy of
making connection between things which once seemed separate. The challenge is to inter-relate broad critiques to specific examples. Nehru's vision of scientific socialism must be connected to a maternal mortality rate over eleven times that of China. Campaigns to save elephants must be related to displaced tribals who have become slum dwellers; unable to read eviction notices, they live alongside the wealth of unemployed engineers. Exports created by the Green Revolution must be connected to farmers starving for cash but kept from organizing by their dependence on fertilizer subsidies. IMF "guidelines" must be connected to the overall failure to either rehabilitate Bhopal gas victims or set legal precedents which would deter multinational corporations from operating in the Third World without safety costs.

Rita: The need for a method which interconnects seemingly disparate issues became particularly apparent in Bhopal. Activism responding to the disaster has had to be a textualization process that continually situates the issues within broader contexts. This has included attempts to situate the disaster within very broad processes such as the Green Revolution as well as within specific patterns of negligence in Carbide's Bhopal facility. We have also had to understand rehabilitation as an agenda much wider than recuperation of individual, physical well-being. Through definition of health as a social process which involves fundamental issues of community organization, specific efforts to provide medical relief are linked to very broad agendas of participatory democracy.

Pradeep: Rationality also fails in representing these understandings. Propaganda authorities may insist on a rationalist realism, but complexities are lost. If symbol is not mingled with political-economy, the telling is not complete. If authorial position is not self-conscious, the truth cannot reach the real story. Thomas Mann may have told how even the bourgeois are made destitute by capitalism but only by sinking his readers into an immobility that seems unquestionable. If immobility had been a starting point, rather than an end, perhaps the story could have pushed toward something new.
Rita: The problems of realist representation have been particularly well portrayed by the alternative film maker Mrinal Sen. Sen was trained in medicine. When he came to film, he was committed to the display of the continuity of history which sustains exploitive relations. Yet, in his film *In Search of Famine*, there is formal acknowledgement that full recuperation is impossible.

The film tells the story of a middle-class crew going to a Bengali village to reenact and document the Great Famine of 1943. The crew leaves the village with the film unfinished. Much of the footage is of frustrated attempts to integrate into village ways. The effect shows the impossibility of both access and representation. The subject of the film fractures, including representation of famine, of middle-class attempts to understand sufferings which are foreign to their own experience and of the multiple realities of the single image. The Famine of 1943 had its specific causes and sufferings but it was not disaster, conventionally defined.

Social science has defined disaster as a crisis event bounded in space and time. But starvation in Bengal has escaped codification. Famine repeats itself, and, in the interim, there is residue. Hunger is never completely off screen.

Pradeep: *In Search of Famine* affirms the continuity of history but in a way which ruptures and doubles back on itself. The actors and actresses play a guessing game between shoots. Guessing which tragedy is represented by a particular photographic image. Is the context 1943? Before? After? The photographs both represent a specific historical moment and are icons of unchanged circumstance. Emaciated bodies can be identified with one space and time, but there is often confusion.


Pradeep: The skewing and displacement of the cinematic gaze duplicates a process continually confronted by activists. The goals of activism are understood to be
ideologically interrelated but work toward them often involves strategies that support one end by undermining another. The requirements of institutions building often require reliance on state resources and market forces that contradict systematic critique. Denouncing the State often delays availability of resources to victimized people. Structuring collectives often emerges only through charismatic leadership.

Rita: These contradictions are a daily reality of work in Bhopal. There is continual critique of the legal system as an arm of the establishment but also sustained attempts to keep litigation in process. There is continual demand for medical relief alongside arguments that state-of-art remedies themselves undermine overall social well-being. There is commitment to the authority of victimized people alongside unwillingness to support popular leaders who are sustained by authoritarianism.

Bhopal sustains a continual conflict of priorities in the dual agenda to both rehabilitate gas victims and establish corporate accountability through punitive action against Union Carbide. This creates confusion over the object of concern. It is difficult to discern whether one’s commitment must be to victimized people, to Bhopal as an international trade issue, to leftist agendas more generally, or to scholarly excellence in documentation. Focus is continually complicated through the logic of activism itself. Integrity is mandated but it is not a literal possibility.

Pradeep: Sen’s film and activism generally show the ways that rationality itself is a mechanism or repression, allowing the accrual of privilege through technology and bureaucratization then representing the process as a natural evolution that is beyond political critique. Famine is attributed to natural scarcity, industrial disaster is attributed to God.

The structural causes of the Famine of 1943 are left off the record. No mention is made that in 1943 there was more food grains than ever before. But they fed European soldiers, not Bengali villagers. In Bhopal, no mention is made of the way industrial organization allows decisions about safety to be made by those far removed from risk.
Rita: Rationality veils. It covers our obligation to learn to see, to acknowledge the artifice of vision, to grasp at what is beyond conventional description. Deeply rooted, long term freedom from coercion cannot come from reductive understandings of the problem. Only targeting landlords or Union Carbide as the enemy fails to show how our everyday decisions and allegiances contribute to the oppressive process.

Thus the importance of trying to establish "Bhopal" as a symbol in public memory. It is not enough to everything we can to rehabilitate victims. We must attach the disasters of technology to the conventional recognition that technology is the source of all liberation. Japanese writers on Hiroshima have recognized the same need. They see their mission as making sure that the atom bomb not only be remembered as a great scientific achievement. This symbolization cannot be sustained within scientific discourse. So much of the disaster is not recuperable. Those closest to it both recognize this unfigurability and most yearn for it.

Rita: In Marguerite Duras' film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, the French actress visiting Hiroshima insists to her Japanese lover that she has seen everything- the hospitals still filled with victims, the museums with their perfect reconstructions, the monument and heat of Peace Square. Her Japanese lover insists that she has seen nothing at all.

The film weaves a story of the difficulty of vision, the unrepresentability of significant events and of the treason of both forgetting and telling.

This tension between the treason of telling and the treason of forgetting has haunted efforts to keep "Bhopal" alive. What we try to remember is that "Bhopal" is a symbol. It brings things together but there can't be a complete telling, a closure of the account.

Pradeep: Outside the gates of the Carbide factory, there is a statue of a woman running with her children. It says so little, such a small part of the story, yet it tells all. It is a refusal to privatize our grief, to hide it under the propriety of purdah.

Rita: Accounting for Bhopal could easily get bogged down in a morass of com-
licities and contradictions. Daily work on specific problems is what grounds us. We have a very paradoxical relation to data. We spend much of our time arguing that the problems are beyond technical description, that they cannot be accounted for within market analysis or through any documentary proof offered by victims. Yet, we also, always, offer our own accounting, fighting over what counts as "the truth," the "whole story."

Pradeep: As we mourn the treason of telling, we also know that over 600,000 claims have been filed; 521,262 people are geographically acknowledged as "exposed" and, according to the Indian Council of Medical Research (a relatively autonomous but still government guided and thus conservative institution), 32.52% of those exposed (169,514 people) are overtly symptomatic with that number increasing year after year. Lung function tests show that 97.5% of the exposed population (508,230 people) as having small airway obstruction, which could lead to future morbidity and now impairs the ability to work. No information is available to document or predict the onset of long term effects.

Rita: Like Steinbeck, we have learned the importance of empiricism as a strategic tool. Detailed documentation is often the best way to expose both exploitation and the failures of our attempts at response. But the description must not be reductive. They must show problems as situated, determined by a complex of factors and changing over time. Empiricism, radicalized.

Pradeep: Radical empiricism is a strategy often relied on for opposing human rights abuses. Detailed accounting of events is seen as a representational strategy that "speaks for itself," the detail carrying its own critique without need of explicit ideology. Tight description is also the mode of a worker's account of the negligence in Carbide's Bhopal plant in the years preceding the disaster. The book "completes the record" with detail about the management process in the plant, ending with a minute-by-minute accounting of the hours leading up to the disaster. Progressive drafts of this book culled
out ideological denouncements with the hope that a wider audience could be reached through tightly documented technical description.

Rita: Throughout activist efforts in Bhopal, there has been a continual push toward extended empiricism. The critique of technocratic approaches to causal assessment and rehabilitation had to continually push beyond reductive solutions. In Bhopal, rehabilitation cannot be identified as individual freedom from disease to be brought about through disbursement of cash and antacids. "Bhopal" makes it clear that health is not only a medical problem. Rehabilitation requires major reorientation of national agendas so that communities can gain control over a range of life support systems. Critiques of technocratic rehabilitation agendas thus became connected to older critiques of cultural imperialism generated in the years following independence, when Gandhian and Nehruvian models of development were still being debated. The critical tradition has been that of Ramanohar Lohia, a prominent Indian socialist who worked to reconcile the insights of Gandhi and Marx.

By the 1950's, Lohia was already pointing out that Eastern Europe had put their technics to the same work as the West, prioritizing capital intensive industry, particularly the military. It was inevitable that their "development" would come to crisis; but he saw the failure not in socialism but of technology. As one activist interprets, "you can't accrue wealth to elite institutions and still expect democratic rewards. The process is the same, East or West."

Pradeep: Lohia's arguments are seen as particularly relevant today because they remind that technology carries politics, that the adoption of any technological form requires a certain structure of society. Activists explain how the determining nature of technology is blatantly seen in an artifact like the atom bomb, or even in nuclear power generators. Due to the hazards associated with these technologies, there must be a control structure commanded by a technical elite which is insulated from all influences that might distract from performative excellence. Democratic involvement would disal-
low necessary control. Anti-nuclear activists thus argue that "to accept nuclear technology is to accept authoritarianism."

Rita: Less obvious is the ways capital and energy intensive technologies of all kinds beget elite control over all aspects of society. Activists thus insist that it is not only the technology itself which is controlled, but all it's produce, including new ways of thinking about the purpose of society and the role of individuals within it.

A pesticide plant like that in Bhopal not only had a rigidly hierarchical chain of command within it's premises but throughout the multinational corporate structure of Union Carbide. Thus, accountability for the Bhopal disaster can be traced from the managers in Bhopal to Indian headquarters in Bombay to regional headquarters in Hong Kong to general headquarters in Danbury, Connecticut. And the control ultimately exercised by executives in Danbury is not limited to control over manufacturing facilities.

A local economy dependent on rapid growth gave Carbide influence over the functioning of the city of Bhopal and more generally over the State of Madhya Pradesh. A very direct indication of this was the site choice for the Bhopal plant. The initial site choice situated a hazardous production facility adjacent to already exciting residential communities and barely half a kilometer from the main railway station. The plant fell out of compliance with city ordinances when, in 1974, it began manufacturing rather than simply formulating pesticides. As the twenty-first largest company in Indian and employer of over 10,000 people, Carbide was sufficiently influential to override the city's objection. Even politicians argued on Carbide's behalf, saying that a factory "was not a stone that could be picked up and moved at will!".

Pradeep: But the real grip of Carbide was broader still. An agricultural sector dependent on chemical inputs gave Carbide influence over farmers across the country. In turn, rich farmers increased their power as small growers lost access to surpluses necessary to maintain the reproductive cycle.
Rita: Dependence on industrial agriculture creates dependence on imports of both technology and petroleum and thus requires a local economy geared for export to generate foreign exchange. Cash cropping thus displaces subsistence oriented farming and transform the very logic of traditional agricultural production. "Value" is not longer tied to utility but also based on markers defined far from home.

Pradeep: Finally, activists also insist that "Bhopal" creates the very structure of their own privilege, albeit ironically. They often reference the fact that many of those contesting the technological fiasco of Bhopal are themselves trained as technics, many at the most elite institutions in the country. As professionals, they themselves are the surplus of the Green Revolution and it's scientific inputs.

Kim: With all the problems and complexities of technology, how do you mediate, your own use? What definition is functional?

Rita: We debate among ourselves over this all the time. Should we use computers? Should we own motorcycles? In the end, we still disagree but tentatively settle on seeing "technology" not so much in its products but as a means, as a way to do something, as a means to get somewhere. Then you must ask, "where do we want to go?" You can't, then, separate "development" from what it achieves, fetishizing technology as an end in itself. Nor can you damn things just because they are "western." But you also must see that any technological artifact, organizational structure or way of thinking has a different trajectory in the Indian context. We must localize our assessment.

Pradeep: Technological expertise is not, then, just a matter of mechanics, narrowly defined. Mechanics becomes a qualitative assessment, recognizing what something is done, and what it symbolizes.

Kim: The symbolic dimension of technology?

Rita: Gandhi recognized the importance of this in his attempt to popularize the "chakra," the Indian spinning wheel. His wasn't a nostalgic primitivism. He saw the chakra as a mechanically justifiable means of productive work because it did not dis-
place or alienate human labor, in the way of cotton mills. Symbolically, it represented a refusal of Western dominance and the traditions which carry it. This was not a refusal of innovation or even efficiency. The chakra he used was an updated version, revised for faster production of better quality thread. For similar reasons, he gave tribute to Singer Sewing Machine Company.

Pradeep: It is the symbolic legacy of homespun that leads many activists to wear clothes made of "khadi." "Khadi" is no longer the cheapest or most durable cloth available. Poor people can only afford synthetics. But wearing "khadi" symbolizes our commitment to Indian alternatives.

Kim: How do you identify the "Indianness" of alternatives?

Rita: There is the conventional argument that emphasizes that, in the Indian context, capital and energy intensive technology is not the most efficient, particularly if you consider "shadow prices" which reflect the social costs of unemployment, resource degradation, dependence on foreign exchange, etc.

Then there is the more challenging argument which insists that technology cannot be assumed to be the natural cure for all our problems. An Indian alternative must reassert idealism into politics. Not through romantic denial of all technology and recourse to naturalism. Through insistence that socialism itself is a technology, a construction to maximize the quality of human life.

We must contest the West's claim that technology is an invisible hand that displaces the need for purposeful pursuit of the social good through simple provision of material abundance. Socialism is an ideal. Toward its realization, we must construct an appropriate technology and economic system. We cannot let "nature" legitimate either unchecked technological advance or acceptance of social stratification, even if legitimated by traditional religious beliefs. Our goal is not merely a matter of function, a matter of survival and reproduction of the existing order. We believe that a non-hierarchical society is possible, but it will require truly revolutionary invention.
Pradeep: The word revolution is used to describe all innovation, from computers to shampoo. Technology promises great upheaval, something new. By definition, technology is opposed to tradition. Yet, most often, technology sustains tradition. Never pushing toward radical change of social structure. Revolution, maybe, but emptied of critical force. Now we must recuperate. Make technology true to its word. Renew a revolutionary vision.

Kim: Strategically, will this involve a distancing from your technical expertise, or a reclamation?

Rita: Activists admit to a compromised position, often reminding themselves of the irony of how much they are like those they fight. We speak their language; we are experts in the very forums which are the basis of contemporary exploitation. The question is whether the resemblance can become a means of resistance, subverting from within. Can we return the look of surveillance? Can we forge an appropriate technology of expertise? It's a dubious battle.

Pradeep: Our resemblance to our enemies could be our greatest weapon; it is what they fear most. It was this fear of hybridization that made the Eurasian such a menacing figure in Kipling’s work. The child of an English official and an Indian woman was never allowed to live; it posed a real threat to the distinction between ruler and ruled that justified the Raj. And the lovers themselves always suffered terribly for their transgression. In one story, the man was stabbed in the groin and the woman’s hands were cut off at the wrists.

Rita: The adult Eurasians that filtered through Kipling’s work always epitomized evil, symbols of the greatest moral threat to Mother England. The culturally Europeanized Indian man was not so much of a threat because he was never quite there, always a child in his mimicking of gentlemanly gestures. As activists, we must re-appropriate the moral threat which the Eurasians represented.
SECTION FOUR:

STRATEGIZING "ECOLOGY"

preface

This section is an example of analytic/hermeneutic writing. It is an ironic mode, structured around the definition process, the ways that language makes and is made by the context in which it works. The focus is on key political terms that are being reconstructed to constitute international environmentalist discourse. The definition process is understood to be configured by the historical development of ideas in cultural context, the transnational ideologies in through which ideas are played out and by the power confronted in the dissemination of ideas through dominant communication structures. Particular attention is given to the ways the definition process has to work against official attempts to encapsulate the terms, erase negative parts of the signification and dilute their critical force.

This section is motivated by the understanding that oppositional politics cannot afford to speak a completely other language, be it of the shaman or of the avant garde. Engagement with power requires an appropriation of dominant communication structures as described by Gramsci. However, terms must be deconstructed so to be used strategically. In India, official rhetoric has been socialist and democratic since Independence. Poverty has been the greatest evil, whether left, right or apolitical. The Left must share the terms but insist on broader and alternative definition. The oppositions which sustain terms must be teased out so that the terms can be denaturalized and acknowledged as meaningful, albeit not without question.

Theoretically, this section is informed by the anthropological literature on myth, particularly that of Levi-Strauss which explains how tropes work together to preserve tradition, accommodate the foreign and provoke change, both in discourse and in social formations. The challenge is to situate knowledge by tracking its constitution through intersubjective processes. The goal is holistic representation, strategized as a response
to Lyotard's insistence that we have not yet configured a conception of justice that is not dependent on consensus.

TEXT

What is it to be an environmentalist when the label is shared by George Bush and a tribal from the hills of India?

Is the mine worker who cooks his rice with fire wood from ancestral lands a "forest thief," as conservationists contend?

Does the tribal woman embody "the East," the ecological principle?

Are gas victims of Bhopal part of the problem or part of the answer?

These are questions posed by middle-class activists working in Bhopal and elsewhere in India as part of the broad critique that constitutes Third World environmentalism. The difficulty of answering these questions reveals how environmentalism itself has become a contested terrain that provokes radical questioning of traditional leftist strategies and their vocabularies of opposition.

"Environmentalism" entered mainstream Indian vocabulary after the United Nations conference on the environment at Stockholm in 1972. At this conference, Indira Gandhi gave a major speech insisting that "poverty is the greatest evil." Her rhetoric was part of a general argument that the First World was using the "pollution problem" to inhibit Third World development. This accusation stimulated awareness of the conflicting agendas called for by simultaneous plans for rapid industrial development and increased regard for environmental concerns.

In India, this conflict was responded to with the 1976 Constitutional amendment which made protection of the environment a constitutional mandate. By 1980, India had created a Department of the Environment to carry out the mandate through research, public education and legislation. Simultaneous to the development of an environmental regulatory structure, there developed organized response in the voluntary sector. There was also a slow but steady response within the commercial sector. Some
management strategies began to acknowledge that the total cost of production involves environmental degradation. More commonly, like their business partners in the West, Indian business learned that "going green" is an important public relations strategy.

Indian environmentalism was quickly mainstreamed. The State and its beneficiaries adopted the language to modernize independence era rhetorics of socialism and democracy. The first environmental law in India was passed during the "Emergency," a time of terror when Indira Gandhi suspended the constitution after the courts declared her election a fraud. Legislation to save trees and tigers occurred alongside censorship, imprisonment without trial, and forced vasectomies. Elite environmentalist received world renown for saving tigers. The displacement of tribal peoples from ancestral lands was not mentioned at award ceremonies.

The contradictions continue. In 1990, the project engineer at the Tehri dam site tells activists that his work is utopian. He promises to create "heaven on earth," irrigated land for cash cropping, power for industry, a lake with water sports for tourists from all over the world. There is no mention that this massive project will displace people, submerge forest land and possibly even cause a major earthquake since it is located in an already unstable seismic zone of the Himalayas. No mention is made of the local people of Tehri valley who will lose their traditional means of livelihood and become peons in service to the tourists. The people have no means of resistance. They are not informed of what lies ahead, only told that they must vacate their homes and shops.

The Tehri project has been caught in litigation. Both sides claim to be environmental experts focused on the interests of the people. Risk assessments of the danger of seismic disruption dominate the debate. Discussion of the politics of hazard displace discussion of the politics of social justice. Promoters of the project play the role of gamblers, risk taking their badge of courage, just like in America. Opponents play a Hobbesian logic of dread, narrowing their concentration to a single issue. The possibility of disaster is scrupulously ruled out by the rules of the game itself.
Like in Bhopal, it has provoked a sense that although efforts to combat the suffering have been mammoth, they have also been complicit, a continuation, not an interruption of the tragedy. As one activist described, "darkness, suffocation, imprisonment- these are the metaphors which carry Bhopal. And not only for victims. All activists involved in the rehabilitation effort have experienced a terrible claustrophobia, a sense that they are trapped in a process beyond their control."

Despite understanding of both structural and immediate causes of the disaster, activists retain a sense of muteness, unable to represent the problems in conventional language, in the forums offered by their political system, or even by their own ideologies. So "Bhopal" is figured not only as an immediate tragedy, but as part of the ongoing tragedy of Third World development. It has come to icon both the elite bias of development strategy and the failures of the various ideologies upon which activists have based their resistance.

What other strategies are possible? Is the only clean move a withdrawal from the game? To avoid dominant logic, is it necessary to retreat from the mainstream? A disaffection with politics and cultivation of avant garde? Art as a source of solace in unchanged circumstance?

Is the revolutionary a shaman, speaking a language that the Center cannot understand? Can there be a transformative politics untainted by existing institutional structures? Are the alternatives themselves bound by tradition?

Activists in the Chipko movement against deforestation of the Himalaya insist that a new politics is to be found in nature itself. Women are the interpreters. Natural carriers of ecological politics.

Ironically, the tactic is popular. Accommodation comes easy. Valorization of motherhood naturally accepted. Upheld by tradition. Sanctified by religion. Materialized by the structure of society.

The women of Goa dissent. They, too, protest environmental devastation and
control by outsiders. Five-star tourism has flattened their sand dunes, depleted water supplies and destroyed traditional means of livelihood. The promiscuity and license of tourists has been a rude interruption.

Goan culture must be preserved. But not through rhetoric that objectifies women. Naming them as a standard that cannot be questioned. The women activists engage in debate with activists from the Church. Their goals seem to be the same. The means highly disputed.

The Church argues that the best way to fight outside control is to cohere around the essentially Goan. Marking deviance as all that which disrupts traditional social roles. The Mother must be revered and never viewed on tourism advertisements, clad in a bikini. Attracting tourists but selling her soul.

The Church insists that the women must remain on a pedestal, veiled from outside eyes. The women refuse. They step on the pedestal, as oxen go to the slaughter. Freedom a bit empty, if only enjoyed by the boys.

It is women's politics but it is also strategic politics. Sustainable response to outside control can only come through an overall critique of how decision-making is organized. Existing separations between the private and the public play to the rulers, legitimating politics defined far from home.

Iconing women as natural carriers of ecological politics carries faith that there is harmony in tradition. Conflicts of interest are veiled and all challenges to State agendas are deemed unpatriotic. Nationalist fervor displaces critique. "Development" becomes an ironic but natural means to progress, a way to grant authority to the Father. The macro and the micro reflect each other, just as tradition demands.3

Tradition has it that the woman and the householder must give. They are a broadcasting wind, expending all energy. A flowing river, never dammed for their own consumption. The man the king must receive, storing up to protect their virtue. It is assumed that women and householders have amassed riches and thus must be generous.
It is assumed that men and kings have spent all they have. They are naked, without even a horse. They become the conserving fire. The magical heat which cooks the raw forces of nature into culture and consciousness.

There are possibilities for reversal. In the story of Ayyapan, roles are transposed and a child assumes sovereignty over a king. Authority comes from the forest and forces of fertility, just like the Chipko activists insist.

The king Rajasekhara greatly longed for an heir. While on a hunting trip deep in the forest, he hears a cry. The baby Ayyapan is found lying alone on a rock by the river. The king adopts him and takes him to the Capital. The forces of fertility flow from the forest into the sterile space of the palace. The Queen bears a child.

Once the Queen has a child, Ayyapan is challenged. He must prove that he is legitimate heir by conquering the forest, the force of his own strength. The task is to bring back the leopard’s milk.

Ayyapan seeks the aid of the wild beasts and a Muslim tribal king. Already a politician, he knows how to co-opt to serve his own agenda. He returns to the capital riding a tiger, accompanied by the leopards themselves. The king then realizes Ayyapan has a power which cannot be challenged.

Roles are reversed but the oppositions remain intact. The story progresses and the men rule the world with even greater license.

It is discovered that Ayyapan was born of no female. The offspring of Siva and Vishnu. Created to overthrow the buffalo-headed demoness Mahisi who ruled the universe.

Mahisi was once Lila, the wife of Datta. Datta cursed Lila for her generous eroticism. It challenged his masculinity, the ascetic drive to store his seed. Datta would rather not sow, even if famine was eminent. He wanted to be a mountain, vertically integrated for capitalist efficiency.

Because of the curse, Lila was born again as Mahisi. To avenge her husband,
Mahisi undergoes great austerities to receive a covenant that nothing on heaven or earth can stop her except a child born of two males who lives as a mortal for twelve years. Mahisi then fights her way up the ladder and obtains dominion over the universe.

Like the Chipko activists, Mahisi did not recognize how tradition itself co-opts. All rationale suggests that the covenant protecting her should have been enough. Allowing her to be separate but equal, able to rule on her terms.

The legislation was appeasement. A holding mechanism until new strategies could be devised. Ultimately, the system is upheld. Vishnu takes the from of Mohini, mates with Siva and a child born without a mother. A classic appropriation of the feminine for political ends.

The child Ayyapan grows to maturity and goes to battle. Mahisi is thrown down and Ayyapan dances on her body. The world is liberated from evil feminine rule.

Afterwards, Mahisi is liberated and take her old form as the beautiful Lila. Fascinated by her conqueror, Lila begs to become Ayyapan's consort. She is refused. He, too, curses eroticism and aspires to vertical integration.

Exchange fails. Ayyapan relies on the wild beasts for his victory but they are forgotten once he reaches the Capital. Money is coined to hide the social relations through which victory was possible. Universal standards are set. Men and their money guarantee all truth. Excluded from the commodity function, they have no obligation to weigh inequivalences. Authority is unquestioned. Dialogue unnecessary.

It is this authority which is challenged by villagers of the Narmada valley. For years, dialogue was attempted. To no avail. The height of the dam could not be reduced. Even though 100,000 villagers would be displaced. Forest land submerged. Endangered species threatened.

Activists argued on the government's own terms. Cost-benefit analysis showed that, acre per acre, there was no gain of fertile land. No creation of wealth, only transfer. Nonetheless, political commitment to the project continued. The activists tried
another tactic. Instead of negotiating with officials, they would go to Gujarat. Dialogue would be forged with the people who were promised benefits from the project.

There was a massive march on the Gujarat border in December 1990. Dialogue was never possible. Marchers were stopped at the border by police. Columns of women approached with their hands tied across their chests as a sign of their non-violent intent. Thugs hired by the police stripped the women and drove them back.

Clearly, dialogue could not be hoped for. Non-cooperation was the only option. A refusal to legitimize official structures. During the 1991 census, villagers refused to cooperate with data collectors, refusing the fraud, the claim that they count. When government officials tried to enter the villages, they were blocked on the road. When a government vehicle was seen approaching, a drum was beaten and farmers rushed from the field. The surveyors came to demarcate the villagers out of their lands and livelihoods. They were denied access to the land, access to the legitimacy of proper engineering.

The non-cooperative tactic was a traditional move. Gandhian, but also folkloric. The stories tell of a goddess in a box, refusing exchange if organized by thieves. The songs are even sung at consumption ceremonies.

"I am Rama, O woman open the door."
"But what happened to your nocturnal business with the rishis?"
"With affection, I crave your company. Open the door, O Sita"
"Women don't want these loving words. You go away."
"One shouldn't believe a stonehearted person like you, Sita"
"Stones have no hearts, you should not abuse women like this."
"The night is over for talk. Quickly, open the door."
"Why should kings speak at night like thieves?"
"Why talk so much. Quickly, open the door Sita."

The songs tell of a strength that can be harbored through refusal. Fire held in check by water, heat by cold, redness by whiteness. There is symbiosis between the container and the contained, a negotiation of their opposition. Sita is not chaste. A virgin to be realized through defloration and ownership. Untouched nature awaiting a master. Her strength is not in her purity but in her capacity to demand dialogue. She is
mature enough to challenge how decisions are made; strategic in setting her own terms.

When Sita looks in the mirror to affix the indu on her forehead, she looks inward to discover herself. She refuses objectification, vanity played for outside eyes. It is by looking inwards that she finds her strategy. Local politics, the means to negotiate her own identity. The only way to deny necessary connection between originality, freedom and money.

It is with the connection between originality, freedom and money that the Uruguay Round of General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) is legitimating the rigidification and extension of patent laws. The logic is very American. Creativity only derives from financial renumeration. Patents are the means to progress. Ownership, a universal desire.

Extending patent laws will further the control and profits of Western corporations in the Third World. Royalty payments will grossly exacerbate Third World debt. Specific extensions wherein intellectual property rights encompass biotechnology is a cover for further privatization of common resources. Within this logic, "natural resources" have no value until "developed."

Encompassing germ plasma within intellectual property rights is a part of GATT's broader encapsulation process. The significant difference between GATT and previous international trade agreements is its scope. Previously, non-trade issues like patents and services were negotiated by UN bodies; trade agreements only covered manufactured commodities. GATT attempts to "harmonize" through standardization throughout all these activities.

In the name of global prosperity, GATT will further the dispossession of entire nations. Indian responses must find their own connections. Arguing that indigenous resources have no value until developed by biotechnology is similar to arguing that Columbus discovered the New World. It ignores the value of deeply rooted communities and their sustainable practices of survival. Without market worth, they can't be
counted. "Free trade" has been represented as an incontestable panacea for all misery. A natural imperative. Its history ignored.

GATT will usurp local determination. It also will extend the reign of the market in cultural terms. Free trade has been given the status of an international moral discourse. God's inexorable law. No mention is made of the interests served by this approach to international affairs.

Free trade identifies the Third World as a patient. To survive, India must be sold health. She cannot afford to buy. There must be a commitment to local alternatives, but even these are coopted.

FAO has appropriated the language of localization but not the method. They claim to be working for sustainable, participatory development. Their polices are still oriented toward increasing agricultural yields through off-farm inputs. The poor are caught in a debt cycle that necessarily decreases their food security, particularly with parallel emphasis on export crops. Now the poor need cash to buy staples they once grew themselves. FAO has increased participation of indigenous communities, in their own destruction.

This hypocrisy has been well documented, even within FAO, at least since the 1970s. They continue to get by with it because the public continues to accept their aggregated accounting processes. FAO, other international agencies, even Third World governments themselves, mark advance according to the GNP, the GDP and similar indicators. These indicators hide unequal distribution, both among people and across whole sectors of the economy. They posit "development" as an aggregate of successful packages, isolated in space and time. Neither real advance nor sustainability can be accounted for.

When the success of development strategies is marked by the GNP, GDP and similar indicators, uneven distribution of developmental costs are hidden. Aggregated accounting processes cannot account for disaster; they are an externality which is
simply omitted from the balance sheet. Terminology is not even available to include it as a citation.

The effort to forge cooperatives that give local people access to industrial benefits remains important. But no matter how much cash flows back into a community, the destruction of communal resources cannot be offset. Even with successful cooperatives, cash crops like eucalyptus, sugar cane and chili peppers deplete water resources, depriving people of both household needs and the irrigation necessary to sustain production of food staples. Mechanized harvesting deprives farmers of fodder needed to sustain livestock and create an unending dependence on off-farm inputs of chemical fertilizer. Cash cannot compensate for the depleted resources, even when it is available.

Resource utilization can not only be identified with extraction and conversion into commodities through technical processes. Some forms of economic activity undermine others through destabilization of the environment. A landmark legal case supported this argument by upholding citizens' claims that limestone deposits in the Doon Valley were more valuable in situ for stabilizing the land and soil rather than quarried to serve private interest. The case affirmed that poverty is created not only through scarcity of benefits but also through degradation of natural resources.

Thus, Marxist focus on the distribution of benefits can unknowingly undergird this underside of development. The veiling is institutionalized by the organization of universities and other research forums. Compartmentalizing problems within disciplinary parameters makes it impossible to see the interconnections. Different disciplines even use the terms of critique differently, furthering confusion over how to offer remedy.

The confusion has been realized in Bhopal through the controversies over what constitutes liability and rehabilitation. Is liability resolved by extraction of punitive damages, by acceptance of responsibility to redress the harm or by fundamental and policy changes that would prevent similar occurrences in the future. Is rehabilitation
marked by the occupancy rate of hospital beds or by the number of people able to enjoy healthy lives?

Meanwhile, people in Bhopal say that the gas has never gone away, that it still covers everything with a density that has sunk into every crevice, every corner. Eyes still burn. Nausea haunts. There is a great urge to run away but no one knows where to go, can imagine no escape.

One woman says she is awakened every night by the rasping cough of her neighbor. She is then afraid to go back to sleep, horrified even more by the silence than by sounds of anguish. She fears she will wake again in the morgue, surrounded by dead bodies, thrown aside as already worthless.

It's though they are still suffocating, always dying. And despite all the explanations, they still can't understand the cause. They can't imagine what has settled over them with such a deathly grip.

Activists argue that being shut out of representation is part of all victimization. Lack of information and lack of an adequate language of description is part of the downward spin. "Bhopal" is a tragic example of this. From long before the disaster, there was a manufactured silence that barred any preventative action. Since, it has been a long nightmare of ignorance and fear.

The veiling process has been a political process with deadly implications. False, or simply absent information has directly exacerbated the crisis. To protect themselves, both Carbide and the Indian government have refused to disclose vital information. In the absence of a trial with forced disclosure, Carbide has withheld any information they have on the effects of MIC and its byproducts. Since the disaster, most research has been carried out by state agencies and, until recently, protected by the Official Secrets Act.

In mid November 1990, Babulal Gaur, Madhya Pradesh Minister for the Bhopal Gas Tragedy finally made public acknowledgment of serious problems hindering proper
rehabilitation of gas victims. While it is commendable that Gaur finally acknowledged problems with the relief distribution effort, it is also evident that his manner of critiquing the interim relief "Action Plan" shifted attention away from real problems and sought to divert essential funds from suffering people.

The first problem with Gaur's critique was his insistence that the primary need in Bhopal is to extend the geographical boundaries of what is officially recognized as gas affected areas. The extension of geographical boundaries would make relief funds available to wealthier citizens who both suffered less exposure to MIC and who are less continuously exposed to the immunological burdens of poverty.

Gaur's second recommendation was for the implementation of a program to curtail "forgeries," cases where the same individual applies for relief more than once or where unaffected people apply for compensation. This recommendation was indeed ironic when considered alongside the first recommendation. Would the two plans not cancel each other out? If residents of newly designated "affected areas" were properly screened and categorized according to real harm endured, would not most of the newly eligible be deemed forgers? The irony has no humor in a reality which excludes even those victims living in the most severely affected areas from access to the aid they require.

The irony of Gaur's anti-forgery plan points to the overall forgery that "Bhopal" has become. Forgery is misrepresentation, purposeful untruth. The insubstantiality of Gaur's recommendations should thus be seen as part of a project of counterfeiting far larger than the one he has finally acknowledged. The press, the public and administrators of justice worldwide have begun to treat "Bhopal" as an old story, unworthy of further attention. This is the great Bhopal forgery.

Is "Bhopal" a complete project except for refinement of superficial problems? As one press release from the victims' organization pointed out, "this is a shameful white-wash which suggests that rhetorical remedies have provided sufficient aid to needy
people and that political stratagems are a fair exchange for permanent injury caused by
reckless and greedy pursuit of profit. Relief efforts thus far have been nothing other
than a pious fraud."

A further bluff is the suggestion that the Bhopal disaster was an isolated event that
can be rehabilitated without systematic reform of economic policies which allow the
imposition of industrial hazard far removed both from the flow of benefits and from
decision-making processes regarding risk assessment.

The forgery of Bhopal is that it has been forgotten, relegated to a completed
chapter of history. Beyond doubt, the Bhopal Gas Disaster is not over. The disaster
continues as people continue to die and suffer without adequate health care or economic
provision. Further, what little relief has been administered has not generated a sustain-
able response, a response which both attends to the harsh reality of an entire community
of people permanently disabled and thus unable to generate income in traditional
occupations, a response which builds a community infrastructure capable of guarding
against future impositions of industrial hazard, a response which disrupts the global
control of multinational corporations which blatantly ignore the well-being of the
communities in which they work.

Politics produce reference and meaning. Political processes are a response to
issues and figures deemed significant by ruling ideologies. Within a vision of capital
intensive technological development, significant points of reference are the GNP and
other indicators of adaptability to the global market. Meaningful information is that
information which designates overall financial growth; information which exposes
unequal distribution of the costs and benefits of growth is not considered meaningful.
Information showing reverse development and misery creation alongside development
does not fit within the market equation and thus does not count as history.

Within a technocratic vision, history is the progressive refinement of good man-
agement tactics, an assimilation of everything to the logic of exchange. The externali-
ties both produced and hidden by exchange are not considered part of the historical process. Since they can not be quantified in the financial terms of the market, they do not have a place in history. Processes of poverty creation are necessarily forgotten because poverty involves both marginalization from the market and experience of misery that cannot be understood in monetary terms. Forgetting is thus a political move, albeit a negative one. To forget the non-quantifiable is to allow capitalist constructions of reality to prevail as the Truth. Forgetting is to accept the dominant political claim that national prosperity can be gauged by success in the global market.

Response to these contradictions occurs within a complicated context. Historically, the Indian Left has been divided by the seemingly oppositional agendas of Gandhianism and Marxism. Both the means and the content of socialism were disputed. Perhaps most centrally, there were radically different perceptions of the appropriate role of science and technology in the development of Indian society.

Traditional Gandhians argued that industrialization would require centralized and authoritarian governance. Small scale, village based production was seen as the institutional basis for democratic social organization. The means to socialism was to be a covenant of trusteeship wherein the rich would assume responsibility for their less fortunate neighbors. The logic was of harmonious interrelation through which differences of interests could disappear.

Traditional Marxists based their agenda on a conflict model of change through which the oppressed classes would appropriate the State apparatus to develop a national, industrial economy. Industry was conceived both as the means to provide for mass needs and the institutional basis for democracy, through factory organizing.

By the 1970s, both these agendas were undergoing critique from within. Gandhians were confronted with the impossibility of localized economy and politics with the spread of Green Revolution agriculture. Dependence on off-farm inputs of high yield seeds, fertilizer and pesticides made it impossible to retain village autonomy. Environ-
mental degradation contributed to the problem by destroying local means of sustenance. Environmentalist legislation itself only exacerbated the problem by taking away access to communal lands and by bringing in outside authorities for environmental control.

Marxists were confronted by the continued failure of factory floor bargaining, ensured both by State control of most industry and by the numerical fact that 85% of the Indian population was still rural. These confrontations led to splits in the Communist Party due to different perspectives on the proper basis of organizing, whether urban or rural. Urban based organizing, following Soviet focus on the industrial workplace, was criticized for privileging workers in ways which elided the interests of those still lower in the social structure, particularly the rural masses. Rural based organizing was criticized for cohering around the middle interests of small landholders instead of around the needs of agricultural laborers. All sites of organizing were critiqued for compromise connected to constituency building and the wager for state power.

Both Marxists and Gandhians confronted the overall rhetorical impasse created by a nationalistic, independence era commitment to socialism. Whatever their policies, governments at the center spoke a language of social and economic upliftment that was to reach the poorest of the poor in the farthest village. Opposition of all forms was thus caught by language, held by a rhetoric that progress was on and disaster behind them. Caught by a history which marked development with aggregated accounting like the GNP and with the number of trained scientists rather than by female mortality rates.

Thus, shared challenges emerged. The initial move of opposition, whatever the ideological agenda, was to challenge the Nehruvian vision and rhetoric which had dominated political discussion since independence. The Nehruvian vision promised an equitable society following in the wake of massive technological advance. Logically, it elides issues of social structure through faith that increased material prosperity will naturally cure all social ills. Social stratification based on caste and class are not addressed. Attention not given to the inequitable distribution of both risks ad benefits that
accrue through industrial development.

The shared challenge of contesting Nehruvian politics was thrown into high relief by the Bhopal disaster. Union Carbide's pesticide plant in Bhopal was to bring science to India. Methylisocyanate, the chemical released over the city, was a component of the pesticide Sevin. Sevin was an essential requirement of Green Revolution agriculture, particularly since it was being promoted as "environmentally sound." According to Nehru, the Green Revolution was to provide national food security and a surplus labor force to power industry that would provide for all needs, whatever caste or class.

Instead, Union Carbide brought the Bhopal disaster. The communities exposed to the leak of methylisocyanate were among the poorest in Bhopal, slum dwellers who had no legal voice after migrating from villages where Green Revolution agriculture had taken away their land. The gas leak was caused by negligent management immune from regulatory intervention because of the need to coddle foreign investment and technology transfer.

When activists reached Bhopal for the emergency relief effort, there was already a clamp down on information. Officials were more interested in hiding the magnitude of the disaster than in providing remedy. Police dumped bodies in the river and announced that food and water supplies were safe, even before an official assessment was made. Hospitals denied both the toxicity and the long term implications of exposure. When queried about the extraordinary rate of spontaneous abortion, doctors told activists that, officially, they could not even tell their own names.

In Bhopal, activists were confronted both with the contradictions of industrial development and with the complicities of State agendas. They were also challenged with working together across ideological lines. The Morcha formed to coordinate voluntary sector efforts was comprised of Gandhians, trade unionists, scientists, and others. Collaborative action was necessary both to organize relief and to interpret the broad meaning and implications of the disaster.
From the outset, the Morcha recognized problems with the very terminology of rehabilitation. There was no medical cure for bodies flooded with toxic chemicals, particularly in a context which defined health as an individual problem mediated by foreign expertise. There could be no prevention of further disaster without fundamental changes in economic policy and in broad cultural assumptions about the means and content of progress.

Responding to the Bhopal disaster required attention to micro-level problems of community health, education and income generation alongside macro-level problems of technology transfer, foreign investment and international law. It coincided with an emerging critique of environmental politics modeled on Western movements which have cohered around conservation issues. Activists learned that environmentalism cannot only be a matter of endangered species and unpolluted air.

The questions ask by activists in Bhopal were fundamental. Can environmentalism become a coherent political strategy that recognizes both conceptual and practical connection between ecology and democracy? Can environmentalist discourse work against official attempts to encapsulate the terms, erasing negative parts of the signification? Can the critical force of environmentalism survive the dissemination of communications technologies controlled by vested interests?

Democracy and ecology share attention to the preservation and organization of diversity. Both understand power as a matter of form, and of distribution. Both understand that social engineering lead to tautological impasse that veil methodological incapacity. Does conventional poverty analysis suffice as a response? Can we continue to focus on the distribution of benefits, ignoring the distribution of costs?

Recognition of the need to bring together disparate issues and to work across class lines is the greatest legacy of Bhopal. In process, activists in Bhopal have moved toward a new politics which reinfuses environmentalism with critical force. It is an ecological logic which brings together issues, activists and concepts which once seemed
Today, response to the continuing crisis in Bhopal is coordinated by five main groups: former workers from Carbide's Bhopal plant who have joined together to chart the history of negligence which led to the disaster; Bhopal Gas Affected Working Women's Union, the largest organization of gas victims in Bhopal; Bhopal Group for Information and Action, a groups of middle-class activists who came to Bhopal to put their professional skills at the service of the gas affected community; Bhopal Gas Affected People's Support Committee, a group of Delhi based activists who provide resources and connections for efforts channeled through the central government apparatus; International Coalition for Justice in Bhopal, a New York based group which functions as a clearing house for the international network of groups which have become involved in the Bhopal issue.

These groups are structured by different ideological orientations, by different understandings of effective strategy and by different styles of working. Difference is not only across, but also within groups. Within the Bhopal group of middle-class activists, one calls himself a post-Marxist anarchists; another is a traditional Gandhian; another is a medical doctor committed to the Lohian legacy of Gandhianism; another is a union organizer and human rights activist; another is a lawyer; another is an activist in the People's Science Movement.

Obviously, differences have emerged. Collaboration is a continual challenge. But most problematic been awareness that none of the ideologies relied on in the past are sufficient. As one activist explained, "we have often called treason on each other failing to realize that oppositional politics now requires a crossing of allegiance that was once abhorred. We are operating in a time when the integrity of the Left must itself be radically questioned. This requires re-definition of what constitutes allegiance and loyalty.

Collaboration requires respect for the ways ideology is shaped by material contest,
including the discourses which embed local and national identities in global politics. Such respect tolerates different understandings of "justice," of the courts as vehicles of reform and of effective litigation strategies. Also tolerated are different understandings of health and of the appropriate role of medical technology as remedy. Work on income generation schemes must mediate conflicting production ethics and critiques of conventional labor relations. Focus on the use of the media and public awareness must accommodate different understandings of significance in historical accounts and of the role of memory in shaping the future.

The challenge of cooperation across nationalities, class and ideological difference has taken on a new urgency in recent years due to increasing liberalization of the world economy. Resulting consumer trends threaten to both homogenize cultural distinctiveness and increase the material insecurity of poorer populations. However, state controlled isolationism has not demonstrated a capacity to sustain either growth or equality. Activism responding to these trends must overtly negotiate the local/global nexus and attempt to articulate appropriate terms of integration.

It is no longer possible to work within any pure space provided by traditional ideology. Conditions and even goals have changed. Activists thus see the present task as necessarily treasonous, a blatant crossing of divides that once seemed morally distinctive. The process is inventive, not mechanic.

One activist described this inventive process as one of narration, insisting that "we must narrate a new story that admits to the exhaustion of old blueprints, a story that carries traditional Leftist aspirations but with acute sensitivity to our placement in the final years of the twentieth century. Old aspirations must be upheld without nostalgia or unwillingness to admit the failures of prior efforts. Tinnamen Square, the "fall" of Eastern Europe, even the social distress that has accompanied the apparently successful welfare states of Scandanavia. All this must find a place in the narrative."

Centralized planning has shown itself to be both grossly inefficient in the delivery
of goods and a poor guarantor of human rights. Similarly, the universal program of
socialism has made poor use of cultural diversity and, by default, has imposed imperial-
ist standards of the social good. Activist thus argue that socialism’s failure to recognize
cultural diversity has not only contributed to asymmetrical power relations between the
West and the rest of the world but also has impeded the capacity for its own reflection
and transformation. Powerful resistance is thus seen to require grounding in specific
locales which offer opportunity to revitalize cultural possibilities which have been
forgotten or excluded.

Subverting tradition from within is a primary strategy. Activist insist that when
they re-write the Left, they must make it an Indian story, but that does not mean a
return to national chauvinism or even simple inclusion of dominant cultural motifs. It
can not be forgotten that efforts occur in a context of rising religious fundamentalism,
institutionalized by the political parties.

Subversion is often a fight over terms, a question of who controls language. We
must expose the unnaturalness of language, the way definitions are politically construct-
ed. But the religious fundamentalists have understood this also. The BJP, a Hindu
fundamentalist political party, can’t seem to decide if they should seize the term "secu-
larism" for themselves, insisting that Hinduism is the only truly tolerant religion, or if
they should damn secularism as an imported term, making an overt call for a theocratic
state.

Amidst the fight over terms, there are nonetheless stories which must be told,
definitions which must be made. Despite the confusion, press statements must be re-
leased, court notices must be denounced and pamphlets must remain in press. Sitaram
Sonavai, the tribal leader arrested as "forest thief" cannot be ignored.

The People’s Union for Civil Liberties did a fact-finding report on Sitaram’s
arrest and determined that the authorities had good reason to be angry. They described
his arrest as "nothing but a vendetta."
For years, Sitaram had organized his people to protest the abuses of the Forest Department. He advised them to take "necessary steps" to reclaim their ancestral lands, to save it from the devastation of commercial timbering was their only chance of survival.

So the tribals of Madanpur and Rampur resisted. A reserved forest area that they had cultivated for twenty-five years was "sold" to a contractor by villagers imagined and invented solely for the purchase. The contractor moved in with teak planting. The tribals removed the plants.

On the morning of August 4, 1990, 75 young saplings were carefully dug up and set aside to be replanted on the borders of the property. Then the police came and the tribals were arrested, beaten, put in their place.

Bhagirathi of Madanpur village had his head beaten against a mahua tree inside the Forest Department Compound. Later, it was said that he escaped into the night. But no one has seen him since. If Bhagirathi is shown to be absconding, the police have grounds to falsify the case against them for brutality.

And Sitaram, too, is implicated. Named the great cause, the originator of all that came after. His "crimes" were many. First, he formed a cooperative of tribals displaced by the Seekaser Dam in 1975. The tribals received no benefit from the dam yet were forced to pay the irrigation tax. The cooperative took control of a small yellow earth mine once leased out to an influential contractor.

Then Sitaram helped village Mahyabhata build a grain bank, storing surplus so that drought did not cause dependence on money-lenders. Next, he helped kamar tribals with self-employment schemes to circumvent their loss of traditional work. Conservationist legislation had cut off their access to the bamboo products of the forests.

The story continues, the arrest is an interruption. Sitaram saw the Mandapur tribals being taken to jail as he sipped his tea at a small kiosk one km from the village. While they had been uprooting teak saplings, he had been 16 kms away, at a typing
center, preparing a report of a meeting held the night before. Eyewitnesses confirm.

But Sitaram was arrested, nonetheless. Released, six weeks later. He fasted twenty-five days, refusing to take food from tainted hands. They were afraid he would die in custody. Then thousands of kamars demonstrated in front of the District Tribal Welfare Office. Only then was Sitaram released. No valid reason was ever given for his detention.

ENDNOTES

1 Ashis Nandy has argued that the true revolutionary is a shaman, speaking a language un-coopted by the Enlightenment project. He is criticized by some activists for a flight from rationality that legitimates tradition, including religious fundamentalism. The criticism was most heated at a time when his work was interpreted as a defense of a case of sati (widow burning) in Rajastan.

2 The women's group I worked with in Goa was Baalancho Saad. It articulated some of the most critical/active feminism I heard while in India. The argument cited here is often part of a Gandhian valorization of nature, tradition, and women. Many activists, including many Gandhians, are uncomfortable with the essentializing moves.

3 Mixing a discussion of symbolism in with political analysis is a strategic move on my part. It follows Mahasweta Devi's proposal that we revitalize our attention to folk forms in our efforts to define a new politics. It also follows the agenda of much experimental ethnography in crossing separations established by disciplinary habit.

4 The protest against the Narmada dam is organized by Narmada Bacho Andolan. In the spring of 1992, a team of environmental experts from the World Bank concluded that funds for the project should be withdrawn. Thus far, neither the World Bank or the Indian government have heeded the recommendation.

5 People's Union for Civil Liberties, Arrest of an Environmentalist as a "Forest Thief": The Report of a Fact-Finding Team (Raipur, September 1990).
SECTION FIVE:

**PEOPLE OF THE FLAG**

**preface**

This section is an experiment with fictional ethnography. The intent is to tell a story of a village in which political activists have worked, a story about one exemplary activist who writes about the village and a story of a political movement which has made innovative use of literary forms. The village is Charsa, an imaginary place made real through the fiction of Mahasweta Devi, a political activist in West Bengal who has been part of a broad effort to stage "people's theater."

Specifically, "People of the Flag" is a retelling of Devi's "Water," published in English in 1986 as part of *Five Plays*. The play "Water" is about the struggles of Dome untouchables who are denied access to community wells by their Brahman landlord. The Domes build a dam to capture water for themselves. Orders are given to shoot to kill. As soon as the untouchables gain their own control over nature, they incur the fatal wrath of those in power. Environmentalists seeking to support the Domes are confronted with a contradiction. Traditional environmentalist arguments condemning attempts to control nature offer an insufficient response.

"Water" is a classic story, a story about famine in times of plenty, a story about a village whose walls have been bulldozed by international trends of culture and political-economy. I have retold the story, adding characters and events both from other stories written by Devi and from my own fieldwork. The attempt is to portray the ways ecological crisis is sustained by social structure and the ways tradition is appropriated as a means to change.

By relying on fictional modes of representation, I hope to make it possible for the reader to sense how literary activism provokes unstable but adaptable knowledge. Such knowledge is particularly important when social transformation is sought amidst dramatic change and without the aid of a reliable blueprint. The progress of the story is
dependent on the interpretive capacity of the reader, provoked by representations of reality which leave holes for intervention.

The plot of People of the Flag" narrates a continual interchange. Devi's stories are about activism and are read by activists. Her plays are about rural resistance and are performed for villagers mobilizing against old and new forms of exploitation. Thus, "People of the Flag" tells of a continual dialectic between fiction and the world, ideal and reality. Activists are as influenced by their own work as are the villagers; history shapes the expectations of all characters, through in very different ways. The literary form becomes a way to both stage resistance and reflect on the particularities of setting, available props and dramatic technique. The narrator is not authoritative; interpretation is the task of audience and the work of political activism.

"People of the Flag" addresses a series of ethnographic questions: What is the political-economy of rural oppression? How does religious belief operate both as coercion and as a basis for collective strength? What does "the past" mean to various characters? How "modern" are their recuperations? What role is played by activists from outside the village? Is there a translation process that mediates traditional understandings and the secular, technocratic context in which resistance occurs? What is the lure of the city? Can the aspirations of villagers show a deconstruction of scholarly opposition between the rural and the urban, tradition and modernity, religion and science?

These questions are pursued through a telling that is both fictional and historical. "People of the Flag" is historically accurate in its description of the political context to which Mahasweta Devi's work responds and in its example of leftist attempts to use traditional performance genres to communicate political issues. The political context is one of great disillusionment with the Independence promise of socialism and democracy. Mahasweta Devi describes the context as a cancer that has institutionalized exploitation and exhausted resources, including those of the Left political parties. In response, Devi calls for a revitalization of the efforts of the Communist Party of India in the
1940s to use folk forms as a means to reflect on alternate forms of social order. Without nostalgia for a pure space unmediated by trade and technology, Devi insists that the response must be grounded in the village, where 85% of the Indian population still lives, endures untouchability and is denied access to the Minimum Wage established by law.

West Bengal has produced some of the greatest literature of contemporary India, partly because of its particular relationship with the British Raj. Mahasweta Devi offers exemplary examples, though she distances herself from the tradition of sentimentalism through which the "idle rich weave narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature." She compares the tradition to Nero's fiddling, while Rome burned, insisting that "Bengali literature has been far too long a field for a retraction from objectivity and an atrophy of conscience. The writers refuse to see the writing on the wall."\(^3\)

West Bengal has also voted Communist parties to State power, showing both commitment to social justice and the ways that the rhetoric of justice can be co-opted to serve vested interests. Devi’s work is a specific response to the co-option. In a collection of stories about the Naxalite uprising published in 1978, she wrote that "after thirty-one years of independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labor. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writing. All the Parties to the Left as well as those to the Right have failed to keep their commitment to the common people."\(^4\)

"People of the Flag" tells a story about village Charsa and recounts a history of a certain form of political activism, in a certain region of India. The region is West Bengal, not that of my own fieldwork in Madhya Pradesh. Like the reader of this story, I came to know it through retellings which sought to explain both virtue and contradiction, successes and failures. Throughout India, I was told about "people's theater" and about its dramatic importance in a context of politically powerful religious fundamen-
talism, of mass commodification of culture through film and of a repressive State which has appropriated traditional vocabularies of resistance. West Bengal was a constant reference point because of its particularly vital and long-standing tradition of progressive theater.

Attention to the regional specificity of West Bengal reminds that structures of exploitation and response are not homogeneous, even within India. Characterization provides a further means to show the diverse ways that exploitation is experienced and interpreted and the ways that resistance is imagine and enacted. Thus, one purpose of "People of the Flag" is to explore the dynamics of social change, recognizing the vital potential and limitations of a specific context. Mahasweta Devi's work is particularly sensitive to the way social action emerges from a network of relationships and as part of the historical process. She also states clearly that "authentic documentation is the best medium I know for protest against injustice and exploitation."

Focus on the work of Mahasweta Devi is also a way to acknowledge the enormous inspiration her literature offered me while I was working as an activist. Her stories remain committed without nostalgia for idealized Left solidarity and with full acknowledgment of the ease with which politics become co-opted. These acknowledgments do not provoke a self-righteous mandate for purism. Like Sujata, the "Mother of 1084," Devi insists on the possibility of discovering a politics through responsive encounters with people beyond our own privilege. Mahasweta Devi's own life is an exemplary example.

**JASHODA**

It is a summer of great hunger. Headlines say it. "STARVATION IN 12 DISTRICTS." But politicians in Calcutta can't agree. They spend two afternoons in Parliament House debating. Is it starvation, or is it malnutrition, endemic and beyond their responsibility? No conclusions are reached. Extra stores of food are allocated but no
question about distribution.

The river Charsa has stopped her flow, months before time. No water to be had from any well. Despite that it is there, allocated for use by all, mandated by the Constitution's denial of untouchability.

Santosh Haldar takes it all for himself. Washing his cattle, irrigating the land held in fictitious names. The Land Ceiling Act is true in West Bengal but it is not real. Water is even poured on the porch to cool it for sleeping. Servants give Santosh his bath. Twice a day in summer, even during drought.

Santosh is the only educated man in the district, an upright Brahmin. Government funding goes only to him. His house rises to new heights every year. Twenty villages are bound to him in debt forever.

Santosh has five big wells and three small ones. His relations never go without. But dogs are set loose if an untouchable even comes close. Not one pitcher of water to be borrowed in the night and no remorse. Santosh says that it is his moral duty, that all will benefit if his kin are protected. Pollution comes from those who eat pig and fowl and it is no fault of his own.

Santosh says the drought this year is because the untouchables have given up their traditional rites. They did not show to offer free labor on the day he worshiped the village goddess Baron Ma. No matter that they were in hiding, escaping a police search for firewood, said to be stolen from the Reserve Forest Area. No matter that Santosh has taken on outsiders for regular labor. He pays them half that paid to locals, half again that required by law.

Santosh's barn bursts with rice and lentils, molasses and mustard seed. His bother-in-law is hired as contractor to dig the wells. There is no exchange, no circulation that shares the wealth. Santosh even owns the ration shops. The Superintendent of Police looks on, happy with his gifts of foreign liquor.

Maghai's wife Phulmani says it well. Men trade in paddy; Santosh trades in relief.
He is the government's own son-in-law; relief an ancestral business.

Santosh's inheritance is a colonial legacy. He is child of the zamindars, control of the land his birthright. The system served the British well. After the Permanent Settlement, all that was necessary was the cooperation of the rural elite. The zamindars kept their power, but for a price. Rent collection became a ritual affair. Divide and rule made policy.

Zamindari estates began breaking up in the nineteenth century. The status of the forefathers began to slip. Santosh learned to compensate. Success required strategy, a mixing of method, attentiveness to circumstance.

Circumstance changed. Independence made this clear. No longer is the government enemy, divide and rule official policy. The language is of fraternity, of opportunity and freedom for all. Socialism is the credo; trusteeship the means. Men like Santosh are to be carriers of the new order.

Santosh is ideal. He knows India better than India knows herself. He can read the culture and translate at whim. India can be sold to the wolves and Santosh applauded for nationalistic fervor. The goal of "development" serves him well.

The momentum began during the Second World War. Within the Haldar household, the sixteenth century reigned on. The men still took their wives according to the astrological almanac. Santosh was sure that one day it would emerge that even the Vedas and the Upanishads were written in Bengal.

Outside, independent India was in the making. The India that makes no distinction between Punjab-Sindhu- Gujarat-Maratha-Dravida-Utkala-Banga. The national anthem is written. It cannot be sung. Santosh trusts no one, only the hard distinction of currency.

Using profits from the zamindari legacy, Santosh buys and sells scrap iron to the Allies. The Congress Party condemns, arguing that any cooperation with the British is betrayal. At first, the Communists agreed, calling the war imperialist. Then Germany
invaded the Soviet Union and it became a war against fascism. The Quit India campaign had to be suspended. For the duration of the war, Great Britain had to be supported. The Communist Party gained official status.

1942, the Communist Party of India legally established by the Raj itself. Santosh is a good comrade. He even attended a performance of Tagore's "Chariot," organized by the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Union of Calcutta. It is the story of a chariot stuck in the mud. The chanting of the Brahmins has no effect. Only when the Sudras arrive is the chariot effortlessly lifted and set free.

The artists thought the message clear. India could only be saved with the help of the exploited masses. But Tagore is a spiritualist, all metaphors a matter of soul. Santosh was able to interpret. In no way is he implicated. Complicities and treason become symbol and metaphysics replace guilt.

Tagore carries the possibility, iconic tradition as universal, forgetting to read differently. Like Tagore, popular conscience perceives India as the Great Mother, the giver of all things. The Mother is not merely the government, but India herself, her soil, her abundance. She gives all but she is mute; she has no audience, only consumers. Because it is her bounty, her glut, which cannot be spoken of. Casteism, famine, asphyxiation, these are the excesses which escape accounting. Cancers for which there are no remedies because there is no way to intervene without accelerating the degradation, no way to stop cells from eating cells. All that can be done is antiseptic, a covering of gauze that hides the wound, encloses the stench.

Mahasweta Devi narrates the diagnosis in her story "Breast-Giver." Jashoda, emblemizing Mother India, has milk sons all over the world. For endless years she suckled children that were not her own. But no one is there when her breasts ripen into cancer, spewing off a stench that no one can stand. Her sores mock with the hundred mouths and hundred eyes of all who took away her surplus, leaving her with a glut that has no cure. There has been no exchange, no child is there to give back, to offer reme-
And so she asks before dying, "Wasn't someone supposed to be there at the end? Who was it? It was who? But her husband had left the number of the Haldar household and the Haldars disconnect their phone at night. So Jashoda died, 11:00 p.m., cremated at dawn by untouchables.

Jashoda was hired mother for the household of Santosh Haldar, a family which had made its money and its mentality as comprador capitalists, during the British era, when Divide and Rule was policy. They hired Jashoda to suckle their young so that the wives could continue to bear fruit without signs of decay, of overuse. The beauty of the wives had to be preserved. Otherwise, how could one keep the son's at home, away from extravagances that might cause their wealth to flow elsewhere?

The second son thinks a lot about how to combine multiple pregnancies and beauty, but he cannot fathom it. Hearing about Jashoda's surplus value, he says, "way found." Jashoda then had worth in the Haldar house. The husbands are happy because the wives knees no longer knock when they riffle the almanac. Since their children are being raised on Jashoda's milk, the husbands can be the Holy Child in bed at will. The wives no longer have an excuse to say "no." The wives are happy. They keep their figures. They can wear blouses and bras of "European cut."

Jashoda becomes a year breeder. Her husband Kangali is her source of wealth. She tells him, "You are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me. Where after all is the pain? Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?" Jashoda bears twenty of her own. Her surplus suckles thirty more. She is a professional breeder, no amateur who knows not how to capitalize on what one possesses. She is India incarnate, the earth who offers to feed the world with her fulsome harvest. The spirit through which the West accumulates its distinction. Kangali, inspired by Rama-Krishna in the movies, refers to the Lionseated goddess as "my crazy one." Jashoda adopts the name for herself.

Jashoda was asked in to the Haldar house for her surplus value. Her task to keep
the wives beautiful, the son's at home, production never delayed. She is revered and
cooed, but only until there are no more milk-sons, no more need for indigo, no more
need for germ plasm from the revered abundance of her tropical forests. All had al-
ready been commercially reproduced. Biotechnology and the end of all indigenous
knowledge, all indigenous wealth.

Jashoda is no longer needed; it is the era of flexible accumulation. Success no
longer sought in populating all Calcutta with Haldars. The great granddaughters are
unwilling. Because of Jashoda, they have time to read the Saturday Review and see the
posters on display outside the fancy dress shops. Simone de-Beauvoir smiles at them
and they resolve to go to graduate school. They become zealous in their liberation, as
they should. But Jashoda is forgotten, technically obsolete.

A move was made. Jashoda contradicted. It is said that such is the power of the
Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the
spirit of holy childhood. The great granddaughters decline the imagery. Divinity no
lure, they demand that their husbands help with the cooking.

Jashoda's husband helps with the cooking but the imagery is not upset. Jashoda
still pulls her weight, guarding her breasts like precious objects. Eating well-prepared
rice and curry every day, she becomes as inflated as the bank account of a Public
Works Department officer. Her milk flows in abundant surplus and she enjoys the
position of Chief Fruitful Woman.

Then Jashoda looses her function, her value. She becomes all surplus, ripeness so
ripe that she explodes with a hundred mocking sores. Even her own husband, her own
sons, refused to visit her. They said she did not know them, that they did not her. They
were driven away by the stench. No gauze could contain it.

Only the doctor showed signs of distress, despairing that no one had brought her
for treatment earlier. The doctor is a benevolent man. A liberal heart. He truly be-
lieves that all his patients are equal, that none are less deserving of care. But he misses
the metaphor. The fact that illness reads differently from different bodies, that some bodies are the place of an insidious knowledge.

At first, the oldest Halder son refused to take Jashoda to the hospital. He was convinced that cancer was no disease for a Brahmin household. India is invisible, herbal ointment all that is necessary. He even refuses smallpox vaccination for himself. Upper case families respectful of gods and Brahmins do not contract the disease.

Finally, the doctor is called home. Jashoda will not show a strange man her inflamed breasts. The elder son's wife does field investigations. She asks if the nipple is shrunk, if the armpit is swollen like a seed. Jashoda says it has been this way for some time.

A hard lump inside the breast can be removed. If not, pressure builds like a smoldering volcano. The skin turns orange, the nipple recedes into a burning crater. When there is ulceration, one can call it the final stages. Fever? It is secondary. It can be treated with antibiotics.

The cancer assumes a life all its own. The sharp smell of putrefying flesh circulates like incense and toxemia inhabits the body. It is an ecological disease. All parts connected. Malignancy spreads organ to organ and ranking of body systems becomes impossible. Stratification is no longer an issue. Metastasis has removed all differentiation.

Extraction is impossible. The problem is epidemiological. An issue of social structure, of individuals in correlation. So deeply embedded and dispersed that no logic can explain it. Causal analysis has no role. The courts cannot categorize. The immune system itself infected.

Cancer constantly defeats patient and doctor. It defeats science and laughs at reform. Patriotism does not suffice. Jashoda's good fortune was her ability to bear children. Now she is unable. Her forests are gone, her rivers polluted. It is the worst of times for the milk-filled faithful wife revered as Divine Mother.
It is Jashoda’s body that carries the knowledge. It is a place of environmental devastation, a place from which excess pores forth and becomes an unbearable identity. Jashoda herself finally realizes. She speaks truly when she says that one is not a Mother, just because you suckle. A different way is iconed. Mother rendered otherwise.

But then Jashoda realizes that Kangali had already left the room, that there was no one there to answer her call. She learns to late that when a mortal plays God here below, she is forsaken by all and must always die alone.

**PHULMANI**

In the final days, the only one to visit Jashoda was Phulmani. Before Jashoda became Chief Fruitful Woman, they had met each day at the riverbank, each searching for a pitcher of water.

Phulmani is the commentator, the one who interrupts the recitation to ask questions and clarify issues. Her son Dhura will play hero. Santosh is villain. The Naxalites and other political activists are directors, the ones who provoke drama into theater and then stage it on many stages.

It is a traditional structure, borrowed from Andra Pradesh. The form is old, but the idiom new. It answers the call to revitalize the efforts of the Communist Party of India in the 1940s. Folk forms must be used as a means to reflect on alternative forms of social order. Without nostalgia for a pure space unmediated by trade and technology, the recitations must be grounded in the village, where 85% of the Indian population still lives, endures untouchability and is denied the Minimum Wage established by law.

The story told is the story of the village Charra, a village made real through the fiction of Mahasweta Devi, a political activist in West Bengal. It is a classic story, about famine in times of plenty. The plot follows that of Devi’s story "Water," a story about the struggles of Dome untouchables when their landlord denies them access to community wells. The characters are from Devi’s story "Water," from other of Devi’s
story and from my own fieldwork.

Village Charasa is a place of punishment. During the 1970s, rumor had it that the village helped the Naxalites. Armed revolutionaries. Followers of Mao Tse Tung. China referred to them as India’s Spring Thunder. In the late 1960s, they waged a campaign. Landlords were their target.

The Naxalites never worked in Charasa itself, but nearby. A ripple effect like a stone thrown into a pool. A disruption of the calm, an echo in the silence. The call lingers today. Insisting that the needs of agricultural laborers are not forgotten as the official Communist Party wages for state power.

The Naxalites never worked in Charasa itself but the landlord of an adjacent village was found without a head. His body propped up like a scarecrow. Arranged to frighten the vultures.

Two young men from Calcutta were accused. They hid in the Charasa forest and villagers brought them food. Charasa forest is a menacing place. After the monsoon, creepers block every path and all view. Snakes flow like water; the police were intimidated. The Naxalites remained safe.

But the Naxalites had to be guided to a train, on to another performance. They were caught at a station two stops from Charasa. Tied to a tree. Their bodies riddled with bullets.

It is not known how the police knew of Charasa’s role. The Naxalites themselves would not talk. They had learned. Tongues are bitten off before treasonous words escape tortured lips. Charasa became a place of punishment, nonetheless. Ignored by relief programs. Watched over by Santosh Haldar.

It is because the village is the margin that marks the center, the locus of symbolic substitution. The famine in Charasa is where all things are, even if not where they begin. The vagaries of Wall Street, OPEC and the IMF come together. A place of analysis originates.
Focus on the village is classic for both Indian fiction writers and for anthropologists. Recently, our gaze has been shifted by the political-economic fact that "things happen" in the metropolis. Shifts in trade and cultural interaction have structured urban space as the locus of contemporary politics. Cities make policy and then broadcasts the imagery which sustains it. Cities are, nonetheless, indeterminate. Village walls have been bulldozed by city prerogatives and there is continual dialogue, even if the published version is fake. Traffic in goods flows both ways, even if not for fair exchange.

Ultimately, it is the failure of exchange, not its absence that makes the village different. Villagers know that they do not move in a pure space sanctioned by history. Arbitration is a social fact both in memory and daily practice. The machinations of a post-industrial global economy have caused significant change but the negotiation process is not new.

Villages have long been part of an exchange process for which there has been no return of value. Things happen but do not become part of the official record. Things are said but they are censored. Things are produced but there is no circulation of wealth. Ideologies are constructed but they are never voiced in Parliament.

The village is itself a myth, continually mediating struggles for preservation through unending diplomacy. The foreign is familiar, even if it does threaten survival. Power is a goal, even if differently conceived.

It is power that Mahasweta Devi writes about. The power of collective resistance, both through the sword and through language. She knows. When one single, distinct word was spoken inside it, the House of Tar fell to dust. The Third Reich recalled. This was their fear, ruling them as it ruled those they ruled.

But Devi is not utopian, faithful that truth can be told. She admits the failure of translation, particularly by middle-class interpreters. It is omission she writes about, and attempts to recuperate. Violence works as much through language as through guns and spears. Glut is the enemy's possession. Opposition, a politics of lack. A writing
of the spaces glossed by conventional accounting. An insistence that what is true may
not be real.

Phulmani says it well. Jashoda is her source of wealth. She now knows. The
cancer has spread, inhabiting the soil of Mother India. Exhausting all resources, even
those of the Left political parties.

Some of the activists say that we must de-metaphorize the disease. That we must
progress beyond myth to rationality and expressive individualism. But development is
itself the problem, the etiological factor which damages all immune systems and makes
all a superficial response to foreign medicine, only offered for secondary symptom.

Motherhood is the addiction. An unnatural and unintelligent devotion to an
exchange process which never trades value for value. India has accepted the role, in-
festing herself with goddess imagery that sanctifies the slave, poverty and eternal labor
pain.

The only possible result is cancer. A full attach that demands attention. An
offensive maneuver which insists that health be defined otherwise.

THE DOMES

Officially speaking, there is no oppression in West Bengal. Government Records are
clear. This is not Madras, Bihar, Assam. It is not relevant that Santosh has breakfast of
rich curd and chida. Milk nurtured with water from the panchayat well, chida taken
directly from the relief caravan.

There is no untouchability in West Bengal but Dome women must go each night to
the dry river bank. Fingers like claws of birds; the time known by the routine of their
movements. At dusk they begin digging. A few hours, many prayers. Then home to
serve their husbands a bit of rice and boiled pumpkin. A few more hours and they must
be back, capturing the seepage before the dawn takes it away. Their pitchers leak,
patched with mud.
It is tradition to buy new pitchers on the day of Holi festival, spring's consecration of Krishna. The divine lover, giver of abundance. It is celebrated with the throwing of colored water. Drenching each other in holiness.

It is a contradictory tradition. Krishna, a tease. Hierarchies are reversed and complete license given to return to chaos. But only after all life is drained out of the demoness Putana. She offered the Lord Krishna her breasts, filled with poison. He drank until she was depleted, all resistance gone.

Lord Krishna's foster mother was the real Jashoda. One day, she was told that her son was eating mud so she looked into his gaping mouth. Inside, she saw the whole eternal universe, heavens, sky and the earth with its mountains, islands and the stars. She saw the wind and the lightening, the moon and the stars. She saw within the body of her son all variety, life in all its forms, strands of matter and action, her own village and herself.

This knowledge was not enough. Not enough to keep Krishna from becoming a flute playing playboy and a warrior with religious sanction. Knowledge not enough to keep Krishna from stealing the maidens clothes, enticing them out of the water, into the no place of abundant light.

The maidens are idealized, given value within the singular logic of Krishna's pleasure. They loose their modesty, all difference dispersed among naked bodies. They gain identity, consciousness, entry into the discourse of world politics. But their own capacity for pleasure is lost. No longer do they harbor an unexchangeable excess. No basis for bartering their own self-representation.

Holi is a celebratory tradition. But a tradition which cannot be sustained. There is no money for color powder, no money for new pitchers. Myth and law insist but there is contradiction. Asymmetry marks the Domes and defines a new politics.

The story of the Domes of Charsa is the story of an "ajir," also written about by Mahasweta Devi. The ajir is a slave, sold into bondage when his grandfather traded
the lives of himself, his wife and all their inhabitants in exchange for the three rupees which would help them survive a terrible famine. The ajir plots to retrieve the bond paper which he thinks is locked away in his master's cupboard. He thinks that once he is in possession of this paper, he will be free.

After many disastrous attempts, the ajir comes to know that the bond paper has long since rotted to dust, that it is not available to be retrieved. This knowledge does not free him but makes him aware that the ties which bind are mere abstractions that have come to be through history and tradition. Knowing that the bond paper is not real does not free him but causes a fatalistic submission to bonds beyond rational or material appropriation.

So Phulmani is suspicious of the city ways of the Naxalites, and of all the other activists whom came later. They may have shared the food of untouchables but they also bought in the army and a magistrate far more ruthless than even Santosh. The arbitration of the panchayat was always unfair, directed by Santosh’s interest and whim. But at least it was understandable. She could trek any decision to a solid place in Santosh’s warehouse, filling one more brass vessel with stores of rice.

Now the arbitration is without source, traceable to no cause. The magistrate spoke a language of city ways and fairness. But he left the village with stores of fresh vegetables from Santosh’s own garden, clothed in a new dhoti given by Santosh’s wife.

White, khadi. Symbol of the new India.

It is supposed to be panchayat raj. Government by the people through their village councils. Mohandas Gandhi networked the panchayats to form the base of a people’s democracy. Indira Gandhi undid the chain, severing every knot.

They say the issue is of scarcity but this is a lie. There is glut but no distribution. Ecology is the lost signifier. Disaster the mark of value.

Disaster as Value? Outrageous but history teaches it true. Landlords would rather not cultivate than increase the shares of the sharecropper. No matter if famine is
eminent. Too much would be lost if the sharecropper ceased to be hungry and willing to barter work for food. Too much lost if the cycle of indebtedness broken. A whole social system at stake.

So for Phulmani the city is not real. A mirage which confuses the eye and settles into deluded minds. Her son Dhura is a victim, caught up in ideas that can not account for the repetition. The malaria comes and again, as do the dry seasons and the gnawing hunger. Equality can not describe the redundancy, the reality.

MAGHAI

It is Phulmani's husband Maghai who places the village wells, diving their presence through ancestral connection. Mother Earth has water hidden in her bowels, remnants of the holy Ganga. Maghai is her chosen priest, locator of the very spot where digging must begin.

No one has seen the nether Ganga so Maghai must pray to her in silence. No icons direct his gaze. He proceeds in a trance, bathed in perspiration. His hands folded together to form a plate holding rice, ghee and sugar. Village officials file behind.

The engineers from Calcutta laugh at the method. The school teacher reprimands. Their own efforts had failed. Blast upon blast and only dry earth.

Maghai's is a scientific method, the logic the same. He starts with a theory, bequeathed by his forefathers. There is water beneath the sand, to be found through a process of distinction. Maghai's role is inductive.

Finally, Maghai reaches a place, just behind the Dome settlement, far distance from Santosh's pure courtyard. But this will not matter. Pollution and place become irrelevant when Santosh is working his ledger, including all profanity if it carries a profit.

Maghai runs in a circle three times then marks the spot with his forehead. He doesn't stay for the digging. Santosh has denied his demand that local labor be used for the purpose.
It is a ritual process but it has failed. A brave attempt, but Maghai knows that it is illusion, even fraud. He feels no closer to the gods, no more integrated into the community. With every repetition he sees more clearly. The structure is revealed and becomes social commentary.

Maghai’s power is not that of the system, coming down from the top. He brings power from outside, a horizontal infusion. The logic of myth is countered, the logic of caste upset.

But Maghai can not give up the divining, his only inheritance. It is forbidden to charge for water no matter what the circumstance. The burning pyre of his dead child had to be doused with sand because no water was to be had. But at least he knew his role had been fulfilled. The generative process of caste maintained.

The gods can only be cared for if the hierarchy is maintained. Only those who are pure can perform the sacraments, bringing blessing to the whole community. Karma dictates. All must perform the duties of their caste. Those born pure kept so by relegateing all polluting activity to others.

But economics was not to be definitive. It was to be a means, not an end. Caste is a system of reciprocity, materialized through exchange. Exchange requires difference but cannot stand classification, a hierarchical arrangement of concepts that veils interdependence. Santosh’s reading is a Hegelian reading, a disguise that reads asymmetry as a unified argument.

Phulmani refuses. Insisting on the folk tradition, that there is no common code, no proper science. She sees Maghai’s inheritance for what it is, a servant to the Earth but also to the landlord. Phulmani scorns the knowledge that she is second, the wife subservient to the River Charsa. Charsa whores once a year, overflowing her banks as the monsoon recedes. Maghai flirts with her and tells her his woes. People think he is a madman but Phulmani knows better.

Maghai is caught by a system. Identified by a process which denies his name.
His son Dhura resists. Refusing the legacy. Questioning what constitutes proper progeny.

**THE NAXALITES**

Dhura first heard of the Naxalites when he was a child. They came to neighboring villages bringing guns and anger. They taught that the landlords were not placed by god, forever in an immutable structure.

It had been twenty years. Freedom at Midnight. Indian Independence. It was to mark the end of times when outsiders ruled India, when inequality was sanctioned by the Queen’s white skin.

History did not hold. The dream was not realized. Like elsewhere, visions became spectacle. Martin Luther King and Woodstock live on. The Panthers shot; Angela Davis sent to prison.

In India, the lyrics were not of harmony. All political parties had failed to keep their commitment to common people. All sides haggled over vocabulary. Poverty was the greatest evil, whether left or right.

There was nothing to say that was not complicit. The enemy within. All of us, Germans and Jews.

1967. The monotony of the battle asphyxiates, blinding all possibility of parliamentary reform. Students have been locked away in the citadels of science, memorizing Nehru’s plans for social engineering. The fortress cannot be defended. Plague is within, harbored in every body.

There is no easy cure, no way to exorcise the bandralok legacy. Like Faust, the bandralok believed that a brave new world could be built from a master plan that destroyed all tradition. But the task of the new generation was that of Mephistopheles, deployed to eliminate a much love old couple because they did not fit into the new schema.

The students are the new generation, children of jotedars, loyal servants of Mother
England. Jotedars became the new middle class, created to serve the colonial state. Their assets were invested in proprietary land rights. Dowry gold in exchange for an eternity of rental income. They lived on revenue and had no role in its creation.

After independence, the sharecropping system continued. Jotedars doubled as landlords and moneylenders, forcing labor against uncovered debts. Wealth continued to flow from the countryside and its source became an abstraction. The city forgot that the center is defined by the margins.

But forgetting leaves residue, dirt out of place. The landless came to the city and slept on her streets. Plazas built for the extravaganzas of empire became cluttered with debris. Remnants of past lives obstruct every view.

The city could not recuperate. The bandralok had no lost identity to retrieve. Their class had been intermediaries for far too long. Away from the land and into the no place of comprador capitalism.

The students needed atonement, a way to fill the void. The spectacle had failed them, abundance proven not enough. They read Sartre and decided. They would play messiah, cutting the evil at its heart. Landlords were their target.

Hell was themselves so it had to be a lone fight. No time to mobilize the peasants. The rebellion was put down within one month.

Mothers were politicized later, during the crack-down to suppress the uprisings. State propaganda connected the insurgents to the enemy on the other side of the border, the freedom fighters of Bangladesh. The State then had nationalistic justification for brutal encounters with Indian nationals. These encounters were not mere killings but tortuous times that left activists broken in both body and spirit. Corpses had limbs missing, collarbones crushed, marks of branding by fire. And all legitimated in the fervor of India's first war victory in millennial history.

Middle-class parents often learned of their children’s involvement only upon a call from the morgue. Fathers were often angry, first at the State, denying their son or
daughter’s role, then at the child, disbelieving that she had breached his code of civil propriety, denied his identity, flaunted his acquiescence.

Meanwhile, mothers grieved. And their loss became a way to understanding. Identifying her child’s broken body became a witnessing of the brokenness of her own identity, of her own capacity to offer all explanation, of the fragility of her role in a network of relationships deemed respectable but kept so only through denial.

Sujata once thought her husband was the center of the universe, the axis around which all power revolves. He was Siva incarnate, every word sacred, every action with universal implication. Then came the phone call, the awakening message. Her son’s mortuary tag number was 1084.9

Sujata had to admit that her child had a life that she did not know. And she saw what the denials meant within her household. And then she realized that her household was part of a larger community, a prelude to a larger process that the State fathered.

Then she heard about the Barangar killings on that dreadful day in August 1971. Over one hundred Naxalites were captured and decapitated. The police perpetrated the deed but the party in power acquiesced. It was a Left party, a cadre of right talking men efficiently preparing for upcoming elections. So Sujata’s politicization was not naive. She did not become a loyal ideologue, only aware of the structures of complicity that her child was trying to breach.

**Drama**

Years later activists came again. They performed a play, told a story. It was a traditional story, about forking paths. Worlds that might have been.

At first, the heroes cannot be identified. They come to be through conflict, battles between opposing possibilities. The battle is a metaphor. A space in which tradition is disordered, a movement that takes one to the next story. There is always a new enemy, a new battle, a new story. There will be repetition, but it will take different form. The
demon is never defeated once and for all.

The heroes must know their facts, the specifics of the battle now waged. Not only one end is in sight but strategy requires focus, a narrowing of vision. Attention to a particular configuration of chariots, elephants, horse and soldiers.

To begin, the army must cross the six seas of salt, honey, curd, ghee, pure water and milk. The territory is foreign, the enemy's domain. To win, we must know their formation, learn the language. Nostalgia for home has no place.

It all begins with Hanuman, the monkey god, a trickster figure. He announces the battle, slays the gatekeeper, leaps over inner ramparts to escort the enemy to the front. The enemy's chariot is pierced, twenty arrows coming from all sides. The chariot revolves like a potter's wheel, something new in the making.

The battle is a delicate affair. The enemy owns the territory but it can be usurped, taken, bit by bit. New borders defined. Victory is a matter of territory, of who controls language.

The enemy knows this, also. The BJP has become a major political force. Hindu fundamentalists that accommodate the traditionalism of Santosh Haldar. The BJP can't decide if they should seize the term "secularism" for themselves, insisting that Hinduism is the only truly tolerant religion, or if they should damn secularism as an imported term, making an overt call for a theocratic state on moral terms. Meanwhile, they shout about "the perversion of Indian political parlance" wherein certain words have "defied dictionaries." They bemoan the fact that "contradistinctive labels" haven't been apportioned by an impartial tribunal like the Election Commission. Leftist, Rightist, Progressive, Reactionary. Terms for State control. Control language and control the world.

So the heroes are poets, experts on rhythm and form. They work to make meaning, differently. No god men of the avant garde, fetishizing change, insisting on their uniqueness. The revolutionary is no shaman. She is an actress who admits her role. Standing outside herself to tangle the real and the true.
It is utopian drama, magic for curative effects. But the heroes admit their uncertainty, always questioning their methods. Overwhelmed by an empty stage, they act out all the contradictions.

Is it an alienating effect that alienates alienating? A German tradition? Phulman says it well. Bashai Tudu is a symbol, history collected at a focal point, butting image against image. All expectation rent asunder. Handwriting covers the wall.

Kipling wrote of tribals as other. Icons of nature. Icons of tradition. Bashai abuts the image. He is a strategist, power his goal. The past has been taken by the colonizers, read a decay. Bashai knows otherwise. There is another past, a story denied. It must be told, and again. Change can only come through another telling, another myth. Revolutionary will and exact pictorial representation.

Bashai’s defining gesture is clear. Before dying, he wrings the neck of the wind, twisting his arms in a gruesome gesture. A signal that all is not well. All is not finished.

It is not the melodrama of popular film, all problems solved within domestic bounds. Bashai knows that the enemy is within, brother against brother. But he will join his brother to fight the foreigner. The coupling is strategic. An arranged marriage to serve a purpose.

FILM

Then, there was confusion. The activists came again, to make a film, a film about famine, the Great Famine of 1943. The official Famine Inquiry Commission reported one and a half million dead. Recent analysts have insisted the number is at least twice that.

But the dead in Bengal were not counted among the honored. Soldiers in Europe fed on Indian rice and were given medallions of silver and gold. Bengalis died quietly, along the roads to Calcutta. It was said there was food in Calcutta and perhaps there
was. But distribution failed and the dying continued, without ceremony, without honor.

The filmmakers wanted to document, to show the contradictions within the continui-
ty of history. So they tried to make a film. They did make a film, but it failed. This
was the intent. Jackals and vultures ruled over the land and they proved themselves
beyond capture.

They came to the village and set up in an old mansion, a pleasure palace built by
Shah Mahmud II two hundred and fifty years before. The fountains no longer sprayed
jets of water fragranced with rose. Persian damsels no longer splashed snow-white feet,
singing and playing the sitar. But the eloquence remained. Columns of marble spoke
well against the small huts clustered nearby. Empty expanses of space said great things.
In fact, it was fragmented, keys to the many rooms held by distant relations, diasporaed
across India, even America.

The filming began with scenes of the migration from the village. Long queues of
shrunken bodies in search of food. But the camera slips, the essence missed. Famine is
not shown, rendered real. Radical claims to objectivity are focused on, caught by dif-
ferent angles and exposed as inauthentic.

The film is a confession of incapacity, a message of lack in glut. The final scenes
are of the crew returning to Calcutta, film unfinished. One of their actresses had quit,
unable to accept village ways. When they tried to recruit a local replacement, they, too,
offend the village elders.

The role to be filled was that of a prostitute, driven by hunger to affairs with timber
contractors, rich with city ways. The village elders cannot separate the cinematic and
the real. Suggesting their daughters is the greatest affront. There may again be drought,
but such cannot be sold.

The film only partially follows the script written out earlier. What remains is a
record of what happened at the shooting. The manuscript ends with the question,
"Where did you run off to Babu? Haven't you come to make a film on a famine?"
THE DAM

Dhura is confused. Sometimes he can't even remember the story. Unable to separate true and the real. But Dhura is insistent, enlisting the aid of the new school teacher Jiten.

Jiten is a Gandhian, imprisoned during the August rebellion of 1942, but never a recipient of the pension for independence valor. He, too, wears khadi and he knows that knowledge and culture have little to do with literacy. But he also knows of medicines that stop the death of snakebite. For this he is respected, but also accused.

Santosh offered Jiten a 60/40 split on relief profits. Jiten refused then went off to visit a friend who had organized one of the border villages, along the River Manta. Village Manta had also been without water. But they had built a dam, pushing boulders into the flow then waiting for the monsoon flood to silt up the crevices. The first year half the water was saved, the next year almost all. Even more could have been preserved if the government had been willing to cast the dam in concrete.

So Jiten brought back plans to build a dam in Charas. The villagers were eager. All in place before the next monsoon. Water was preserved and Dome women no longer had to scratch at dry sand in a rush before dawn. They slept more, ate more, and drank their fill.

This, Santosh could not tolerate. Not enough leverage for his authority; not enough suffering against which to define his pleasure.

No longer could Maghai be expected to deliver his eggs to market, no exchange except a pitcher of water. Phulmani would no longer pick his apples, anxious to enjoy the washing.

Even baths became less enjoyable. Ruined by the laughter of Dome children as they swam in the reservoir. Santosh's cows gave him less glory when they were no cleaner
than those of the milkman Paatan. Santosh, pained deeply by the scorn of daughters
once desperate for his attention and petty gifts.

So the dam was broken, orders given to shoot to kill. Maghai was wounded and then
threw himself upon the rushing waters. Finally, wanting no more part of the cycle of
rites. No matter that his death would not be connected to his ancestors.

Others were beaten then lead filled their guts. Some crawled into the darkness.
Others were loaded into police vans, already on call.

Dhura took shelter in a shadowed ravine, eyes blurred by a dripping wound. He
watched his mother loaded into the vans. Her screams echoed across the valley. Then
silence, thickened with anger.

Like the Naxalites, the school teacher was encountered. shot dead even though
having no means of escape. But the mark he left was indelible, tattooed across the
landscape, a script which Dhura had learned to read.

The villagers were in jail for thirty-six days. Little food and no medicines available.
Released only when so fatigued by beatings that they signaled no threat. The police did
not know about Dhura.

**DHURA**

When Dhura spoke, the people decided. They would go but they would take their
gods with them. They were no longer obliged to suffer. It was done in Tamil Nadu. It
can be done here. Activists told them the story.

The city may be a mirage but it would be different. The cycle of suffering would be
broken, even if begun again. The path would be otherwise.

They would go to the main market, center of the city, hiring out in exchange for
food. They had seen it in films, heard about from those who had gone and come back.
Activists may disdain the place but it had it’s lure.

Activists are caught by the village, picturing an ideal place. They say the villag-
ers must stay and fight for the old ways. Those from the city cannot understand.

After the shooting, a team of activists came from Calcutta. Members of the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties. They came to investigate, to tally the abuse. They should have come before. Is not denial of water itself a breach of human rights? Does not ecology show the connections? Is conversation the only issue? Brahmans and trees?

The activist are trained as scientists. They learned critique from within. Environmentalism defined as a challenge to the attempt to control nature. But it is when the untouchables gain their own control over nature that disaster escalates. How can the environmentalists respond?

They will document, telling it like it is, a preparatory exercise that exposes both the failures of the system and of their own strategies of opposition. Empiricism is the legacy they have borrowed from science. Like Mahasweta Devi, they know that authentic documentation is the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation. For to long, Bengali literature has been a retraction from objectivity and an atrophy of conscience.

The city is a reference. For too long, writers have placed the city as "other," the place where Indian tradition is rent asunder and evil prevails. Mahasweta Devi's take is more complex. Tradition is disrupted within Charsa itself. The city offers a promise, but no determination. City language may not be real, but its aspirations are true.

The Domes of Charsa will go to the city. All can sweep floors, all can headload baskets of fruit. No skills required. In films, there is always success. But even this is not expected. Golconda is not their destination. Great riches not their hope.

Only difference, a new idiom in which to live as they must. A new space that confuses a history of separateness, Dome houses at least 100 yards from the Brahmin courtyard. No Dome permitted to stand within.

Their own ways are also to be bartered, exchanged for something foreign. Divining
has no place in the city and this is good. Water comes from iron pipes on corners of broad streets. People hover 'round be their blood Brahmin or other.

They will become part of the traffic in goods from elsewhere, disrupting Calcutta with their Dome ways, trading their own ways for others. They leave home for a crossing, a structured change.

The lure of the city is its pollution. Calcutta is infamous, even in the countryside. No one has missed the stories of Dhurga puja. Everyone knows. Images of the Mother are adorned and then thrown into a tank.

ENDNOTES


2 The environmentalists are not part of Devi's story. I have added these characters to elaborate my own focus on environmental activism.


10 Devi, Bashai Tudu.

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