

# Voices of Marginalised Bhopal and the oeuvre of Suroopa Mukherjee

Key Words: *Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Surviving Bhopal, Women's Study, Industrial Disaster*

*"Common good is worth nothing if it is obtained at the cost of a single tear of a child."*

*-Fyodor Dostoevsky*

ISSN 0975 1254 (PRINT)  
ISSN 2249-9180 (ONLINE)  
www.shodh.net

A Refereed Research Journal  
And a complete Periodical dedicated to  
Humanities & Social Science Research

*The Bhopal gas tragedy is one of the most terrible event in the history of India. This accident turned the city into a gas chamber. The shockwaves of the disaster were heard all over the world. It stunned the whole humanity on the planet. There are some documented works which may throw more light on dark sides of the tragedy. One of such works on Bhopal accident is 'Surviving Bhopal: Dancing Bodies, Written Texts and Oral testimonials of Women in the Wake of an Industrial Disaster' by Mukherjee S., published in 2010. This research paper, is analytical review of this book.*

**Sonu Saini**  
**Assistant Professor**  
CRS, SLL&CS  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi - 110067

The XX century is known not only for development in the sphere of science and technology. It is also seen as an era of man-made disasters like World War I, World War II, nuclear and chemical accidents, etc. A number of historians have attempted to document the history of such tragedies. It has been found that various versions of the same event are available today. These versions may vary or contradict each other in their interpretations. The famous scholar Allen C. Guelzo writes: "History is not truth. While it forms the backbone of our knowledge about the world, history is nevertheless only a version of events. History is shaped by the interpretations and perspectives of the individual historians who record it"<sup>1</sup>. The nature of sources available at the time of documenting history, play a major role in the interpretation of an event. Some of the main available sources usually published include official records, newspapers, archives, chronicles, journals and other relevant published material on any event or tragedy.

The Bhopal gas tragedy is one such terrible event in the history of India, which shook the whole world. On the night of 2-3 December 1984, Bhopal, a relatively little-known city in Central India, became the focus of international attention as the site of the "world's worst-ever industrial disaster"<sup>2</sup>. At midnight, 40 metric tons of methyl isocyanate gas (MIC) escaped from the Union Carbide pesticide plant. Thousands of innocent people in the neighbouring slums and eventually were killed and maimed men, women and children.<sup>3</sup> This accident turned the city into a gas chamber.<sup>4</sup> The shockwaves of the disaster were heard all over the world. It stunned the whole humanity on the planet.

It would not be wrong to call it a dark chapter in Indian history. To sketch the tragedy a number of accounts were published in books, journals, newspapers, etc. Each account reports this tragedy on varying scales. Official sources claimed 5,000 lives were lost due to Bhopal gas accident, but real factors indicate the number of deaths was more than 20,000.<sup>5</sup>

शोध संघ

It's almost 30 years since the Bhopal Gas Tragedy occurred. The historians made painstaking efforts in describing the real picture of this tragedy, but today also one may not be sure that all aspects of this terrible page of the history are known. Bhargava Pushpa says, "What is particularly tragic is the lack of information from those who have it, or should have had it. One would have liked to see an objectively written, comprehensive, reliable and authentic white paper on the tragedy. It is not the lack of expertise but the lack of a culture of concern, of thoroughness, of efficiency, all round, which generates such tragedies—and then sustains them, instead of ameliorating them, through time"<sup>6</sup>. The work in the genre of documentary prose may throw more light on dark sides of the tragedy. One of such works on Bhopal accident is "*Surviving Bhopal: Dancing Bodies, Written Texts, and Oral testimonials of Women in the Wake of an Industrial Disaster*" by Mukherjee S., published in 2010. Commenting on the importance and nature of oral history the author writes, "Oral history is brought in to give people agency by allowing them to participate in the recovery and reconstruction of their experience. The oral history is especially useful in recreating a traumatic experience, by using empathy and compassion to evoke subjective states of mind and heart"<sup>7</sup>. The testimonies take us deep into the psychology of the sufferers and the ordinary people. The work brings out many facts about the chemical accident in Bhopal and life after the tragedy.

Mukherjee S. has written her works based on the testimonies of sufferers and documents. One of the specificities of the work is that the author has incorporated gender perspective through unheard marginalised voices of women who were the part of Bhopal's nightmare. Commenting on the relevance of the gender perspectives author states that "the most powerful media-generated images of the disaster are faces of men and women staring blankly at the uncertain future"<sup>8</sup>. There were claims from various sides of the society that the women are missing from official documents, which are supposed to be used in compensation courts. The tool of testimonies has been used to retrieve the lost and unheard voices. On the methodology of work author says "I use testimonials to highlight the oral and experiential nature of living through the night, and the fact that all those who were caught in its monstrous proportions were part of the action, without any scope for objective viewing"<sup>9</sup>. It is known that after any tragedy the survivors wish to share their traumatic moment with others. If there

is nobody to listen to them, then they feel neglected and may get psychological disorders. Sharing their story, trauma and pain work as therapy for survivors. Sharing their history heals the soul of the sufferers.

The author recorded the voices of sufferers, consulted official and archival sources and found that there is a vast distance between what has been reported officially and reality. Mukherjee S. writes: "I draw on resources provided by oral history methodology, to recreate the interface between what is 'reported' officially and the 'lived experience' of trauma and suffering as recorded through neglected voices of people"<sup>10</sup>.

In the work of Mukherjee there are the voices of people from different layers of the society. The work starts with an introduction of the factory to the reader and a narration what exactly happened on the night of December 3, 1984. It includes various references and reports from organizations including report from Central Bureau of Investigation. In the words of the author it "explores the power play between politics, economics, and science to show that the 'cause' of the disaster and its tragic aftermath can best be explained as a total systemic failure."<sup>11</sup> The documents louder the voices of the sufferers, who were barely listened.

Suroopa Mukherjee caters the link between individual's unheard voice and the subjectivity of the recorded history. One of the survivors narrates to the author, "We had no idea what was happening to us. We did not know what sort of gas it was and why it was making us writhe with pain. Actually nothing of the real situation has been described anywhere, simply because nobody would have known what to write. In that sense a great deal of what happened has not been recorded at all. For instance, we are told that an entire colony of gypsies who lived on the pavement near the railway station was completely wiped out. But nobody recorded their names or who they were. Bhopal is full of untold stories that are lost forever."<sup>12</sup> The survivors felt as if they were marginalised after the incident.

The book takes one step forward in uncovering the role of multinational companies in Indian economics. The author claims with the support of documents that "more than 1,00,000 people continue to suffer chronic and debilitating illnesses; survivors are still awaiting economic and social rehabilitation; plant site still awaits clean up; no one has been held accountable for the gas leak. On the other hand, there was increasing talk about 'fairness in a fragile world'."<sup>13</sup>

Mukherjee throws light on oral testimonies of the people, the victims of this tragedy. The voices of those that survived and relatives of the victims shout as a choir to make others listen to their unheard voices. The author has included voices of women, who became the bread earner for the whole family after their husband's death. The gender politics, discrimination, sufferings of women after the tragedy are in focus here. There were many instances of stillborn or deformed babies born to women who were pregnant at the time of the tragedy. One of the victims narrates her story about how she had a miscarriage due to the chemical disaster: "I was two months pregnant at that time. I had a miscarriage right in the middle of the road; my body was covered with blood. I was unable to control the bowels and the faeces ran down my legs."<sup>14</sup> The recent news says "Nearly 1,50,000 people were battling chronic illnesses of the lungs or liver. Women had suffered disproportionately with many complaining of gynaecological and reproductive health disorders."<sup>15</sup> Mukherjee has paid attention to the government's role in the rehabilitation of the victims after the tragedy in her work. The testimonies of the sufferers illustrate the miserable conditions they have been living in. The questions have been raised on how schemes that were meant to benefit survivors, worked against their interest. The Author raises the issue that the economic rehabilitation programmes were not gender sensitive.<sup>16</sup>

The work of Mukherjee S. also reveals the real picture of a medical catastrophe that appeared after the accident. Lack of proper information about the nature of disaster exacerbated the damages. The author has included various testimonies that show how doctors could not understand the nature of the sudden health problems of the victims. The voices of people narrate the total failure of medical rehabilitation after the tragedy. The author supports the unheard voices by giving reference to the voluntary surveys. One of the surveys was conducted by Centre for Community Health and Social Medicine, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi in December 1989. "Its report titled Against All Odds focused on the health status of women. Questions were raised about the importance of such voluntary efforts that would be of direct and immediate use for strengthening the case of the gas-affected victims".<sup>17</sup> With the help of unheard voices it was found that many survivors were not included in official records as the victims. The above said voluntary surveys included what

was missing in official surveys. The testimonies in the present work show the realistic picture of how families had to borrow money to pay medical bills of the victims or survivors.

The author has analysed the links between activism and self-development. The track has been recorded about the struggle and achievement of the newly created class in the society i.e. 'victims' and 'survivors' of the worst industrial disaster. Post-disaster there was a need to capture nuances of voices. Depicting history by nuances of unheard voices i.e. testimonies of the victims or sufferers as human document provides an alternate view of a particular event. Through the testimonies and documents collected by the author, one can revisit the history of Bhopal Gas tragedy. By analyzing the human document in author's work following points may be presented to revisit the tragedy:

After the accident, people had no idea what danger they were in and how to escape from the same. The victims were running here and there without any sense. It was seemed like apocalypses – end of the world to victims. A number of children exposed to the gas died within the first days of the accident, and others survived with biological disorders. The major victim of the tragedy are considered to be women who have been facing various health issues including gynaecological problems, inability to work and difficulties with child bearing. Many women gave birth to down's syndrome babies<sup>18</sup>, suffering increased financial burden because of illness, widows have not received appropriate compensation, etc. Women who were exposed to the gas tragedy are facing a social stigma that they are having difficulties in getting married.<sup>19</sup> No one wants to get married to a gas affected woman. The various studies found that the company and government did not pay attention towards safety measures. No emergency plan to cope with the tragedy. People are of the opinion that those that died that night were lucky. The unlucky were left behind to suffer for days, weeks, months and a lifetime of torture after the accident. Lack of information on methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas made doctors helpless in the hospital to provide appropriate treatment to the victims. The condition and after effects on women are least studied and paid attention to. A number of victims could not get necessary documents in support to their claim even after running from pillar to post. Many victims could not get the compensation even after having all the documents.

**Conclusion: Unheard Voices**

It is now more than 30 years since the Bhopal Gas tragedy occurred, but the survivors are still waiting to get justice. Many of them have died while waiting for the day of justice. These people have been holding demonstrations and protest for delaying the justice. The Union Carbide had paid a mild compensation to a few people only.<sup>20</sup> The voices of the sufferers are unheard and marginalised in the wake of globalisation and industrialisation.

On one hand, the culprit Warren Anderson along with others were arrested after the incident and on the other hand, not only were they released, but were also provided special facilities and farewell by the Indian authorities. The injustice moves further on that the official records and files have gone missing in government offices. Recently the PMO office responded that "no record available on arrest and subsequent release of former Union Carbide chairman Warren Anderson"<sup>21</sup>. This chairman is just only one of the images in the society, which can disappear with the help of power and money leaving thousands of traumatized voices behind.

A number of lessons are to be learnt from such human errors in the progress of science and technology. After all, human and nature are bearing the cost of these errors. The author of the work Mukherjee says in this context: "Surviving Bhopal juxtaposes concepts of progress, technological innovation, and development that went into defining the vision, with the oral history of people who paid the price for its failure"<sup>22</sup>. A number of human errors emerged in last centuries such as Three Mile Island accident (US: 1979), Chernobyl disaster (Russia: 1986), etc. The XXI century has also started its counting of human errors such as Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster (Japan: 2011), Nuclear Submarine INS Sindhurakshak accident (India: 2013). The development of science & technology cannot be justified at the cost of human being and destruction of nature. A lot of attention is required on the safety measures as well as the liability. Revisiting Bhopal is one of the lessons, which is the need of the hour to be learnt by all of us otherwise the Bhopal Gas tragedy can happen again in any form and may destroy a huge number of human souls.

**References:-**

1. [http://www.thegreatcourses.com/tgc/courses/course\\_detail.aspx?cid=8818](http://www.thegreatcourses.com/tgc/courses/course_detail.aspx?cid=8818) (Accessed on 03-01-2014)
2. Amnesty International. Clouds of Injustice: Bhopal Disaster 20 Years on. Oxford. 2004. p.8.
3. Larry Everest. Behind the Poison Cloud: Union Carbide's Bhopal Massacre. Banner Press. Chicago. 1985. p. 95.
4. India's Environment – 1984-85. Health. p.206 <http://www.greengrants.org/2007/01/04/india-bhopal-the-worlds-worst-industrial-disaster/> (Accessed on 11-09-2013)
5. Mukherjee S. Surviving Bhopal: Dancing bodies, written texts, and oral testimonials of women in the wake of an industrial disaster. Palgrave Macmillan. 2010. p. ix.
6. Bhargava Pushpa M. The Bhopal Tragedy: A Middle Word. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. XX, No. 22, June 1, 1985 p. 962.
7. Ibid. p. 8.
8. Ibid. p. 2.
9. Ibid. p. 42.
10. Mukherjee S. Surviving Bhopal: Dancing bodies, written texts, and oral testimonials of women in the wake of an industrial disaster. Palgrave Macmillan. 2010. p. 3.
11. Ibid. p. 9.
12. Ibid. p. 46.
13. Ibid. p. 74.
14. Ibid. p. 56.
15. The Hindu. December 4, 2012. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/amnesty-calls-for-justice-for-bhopal-gas-victims/article4161420.ece?css=print>
16. Mukherjee S., Surviving Bhopal: Dancing bodies, written texts, and oral testimonials of women in the wake of an industrial disaster. Palgrave Macmillan. 2010. P. 11.
17. Against all Odds: Continuing Effects of the Toxic Gases on the Health Status of the Surviving Population in Bhopal. New Delhi: The Centre for Community Health and Social Medicine. Jawaharlal Nehru University. 1989.
18. Sarkar S. Life remains toxic for children fo Bhopal gas victims. Hindustan Times. November 28, 2012.
19. Amnesty International. Clouds of Injustice: Bhopal Disaster 20 Years on. Oxford. 2004. p.21.
20. The Hindu. Bhopal gas tragedy survivors stage demonstration in Mumbai. April 20, 2013. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/bhopal-gas-tragedy-survivors-stage-demonstration-in-mumbai/article4599340.ece>
21. The Hindu. Bhopal gas leak: PMO has no record on Anderson's flight. August 9, 2013. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/bhopal-gas-leak-pmo-has-no-record-on-andersons-flight/article5007233.ece>
22. Mukherjee S. Surviving Bhopal: Dancing bodies, written texts, and oral testimonials of women in the wake of an industrial disaster. Palgrave Macmillan. 2010. P. 2.



प्रकाशन शोध प्रक्रिया का अंतिम और अत्यंत महत्वपूर्ण चरण होता है। शोध समाज की मूल्यवान उपलब्धि है। इसे समाज के बीच आना ही चाहिए जिससे समस्त मानवता लाभ उठा सके। प्रकाशन के सीमित अवसर शोध को संकुचित करते हैं।