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The Lifting of the Veils

In the years after the poison cloud came down from the factory, the veils covering the faces of the Muslim women of Bhopal started coming off too.

The Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (the Bhopal Gas-Affected Women Workers' Organization), or BGPMUS, is the most remarkable and, after all these years, the most sustained movement to have sprung up in response to the disaster. The BGPMUS grew out of a group of sewing centers formed after the event to give poor women affected by the gas a means of livelihood. As they came together into the organization, the women participated in hundred of demonstrations, hired attorneys to fight the case against Carbide as well as the Indian government, and linked up with activist movements all over India and the world.

On any Saturday in Bhopal, you can go to the park opposite Lady Hospital and sit among an audience of several hundred women and watch all your stereotypes about traditional Indian women get shattered. I listened as a grandmother in her sixties got up and hurled abuse at the government with a vigor that Newt Gingrich would envy. She was followed by a woman in a plain Sari who spoke for an hour about the role of multinationals in the third world, the wasteful expenditure of the government on sports stadiums, and the rampant corruption to be found everywhere in the country.

As the women of Bhopal got politicized after the gas, they became aware of other inequities in their lives too. Slowly, the Muslim women of the BGPMUS started coming out of the veil. They explained this to others and themselves by saying: look, we have to travel so much, give speeches, and this burkha, this long black curtain, is hot and makes our health worse.

But this was not a sudden process; great care was paid to social sensitivities. When Amida Bi wanted to give up her burkha, she asked her husband. “My husband took permission from his older brother and my parents.” Assent having been given all around, Amida Bi now goes all over the country without her veil, secure in the full support of her extended family.

Her daughters, however, are another matter. Having been married out to other families, they still wear the burkha. But Amida Bi refuses to allow her own two daughters-in-law, over whom she has authority, to wear the veil at all. “I don't think the burkha is bad,” she says. “But you can do a lot of shameful things while wearing a burkha.”

Half of the Muslim women still attending the rallies have folded up their burkhas for ever.

Sajida Bano's Story

Sajida Bano never had to use a veil until her husband died. He was the first victim of the Carbide plant: In 1981, three years before the night of the gas, Ashraf was working in the factory when a valve malfunctioned and he was splashed with liquid phosgene. He was dead within 72 hours. After that, Sajida was forced to move with her two infant sons to a bad neighborhood, where if she went out without the burkha she was harrassed. When she put it on, she felt shapeless, faceless, anonymous: she could be anyone's mother, anyone's sister.

In 1984, Sajiba took a trip to her mother's house in Kanpur, and happened to come back to Bhopal on the night of the gas. Her four-year-old son died in the waiting room of the train station, while his little brother held on to him. Sajiba had passed out while looking for a taxi outside. The factory had killed the second of the three people Sajiba loved most. She is left with her surviving son, now 14, who is sick in body and mind. For a long time, whenever he heard a train whistle, he would run outside, thinking his brother was on that train.

Sajiba Bano asked if I would carry a letter for her to “those Carbide people,” whoever they are. She wrote it all in one night, without revision. She wants to eliminate distance, the food chain of activists, journalists, lawyers, and governments between her and the people in Danbury. Here, with

her permission, are excerpts that I translated:

Sir,

Big people like you have snatched the peace and happiness of us poor people. You are living it up in big palaces and mansions. Moving around in cars. Have you ever thought that you have wiped away the marriage marks from our foreheads, emptied our laps of children, bathed us in poison, and we are sobbing, but death doesn't come. Like a living, walking corpse you have left us. At least tell us what our crime was, for which such a punishment has been given. If with the strength of your money you had shot us all at once with bullets, then we wouldn't have to die such miserable sobbing deaths.

You put your hand on your heart and think, if you are a human being: if this happened to you, how would your wife and children feel? Only this one sentence must have caused you pain.

If this vampire Union Carbide factory would be quiet after eating my husband, if heartless people like you would have your eyes opened, then probably I would not have lost my child after the death of my husband. After my husband's death my son would have been my support. But before he could grow you uprooted him. I don't know myself why you have this enmity against me.

Why have you played with my life so much? What was I, a poor helpless woman, spoiling of yours that even after taking my husband you weren't content. You ate my child too. If you are a human being and have a human heart then tell me yourself what should be done with you people and with me. I am asking you only, tell me, what should I do?

Negative-Positive

The gas changed people's lives in ways big and small. Harishankar Magician used to be in the negative-positive business. It was a good business. He would sit on the pavement, hold up a small glass vial, and shout, "Negative to positive!" Then, hollering all the while, he would demonstrate. "It's very easy to put negative on paper. Take this chemical, take any negative, put it on any paper, rub it with this chemical, then put it in the sun for only 10 minutes. This is a process to make a positive from a negative." By this time a crowd would have gathered to watch the miraculous transformation of a plain film negative onto an image on a postcard. In an hour and a half, Harishankar Magician could easily earn 50, 60 rupees (\$2) in this business. Then the gas came.

It killed his son and destroyed his lungs and his left leg. In the negative-positive business, he had to sit for hours. He couldn't do that now with his game leg, and he couldn't shout with his withered lungs. So Harishankar Magician looked for another business that didn't require standing and shouting. Now he wanders the city, pushing a bicycle that bears a box with a hand-painted sign: "ASTROLOGY BY ELECTRONICE MINI COMPUTER MACHIN."

Passersby, seeing the mysterious box, gather spontaneously to ask what it is. He invites them to put on the Stethoscope, which is a pair of big padded headphones attached to the Machin. Then the front panel of the Machin comes alive with flashing Disco Lights, rows of red and yellow and green colored bulbs. The Machin, Harishankar Magician tells his customers, monitors their blood pressure, then tells their fortune through the Stethoscope. The fee is two rupees (six cents). Harishankar doesn't like this business; with this, unlike his previous trade, he thinks he is peddling a fraud. Besides, he can only do it for an hour and a half a day, and clears only about 15 rupees (43 cents).

Harishankar Magician is sad. He yearns for the negative-positive business. Once the activist Sathyu took a picture of Harishankar's son, who was born six days before the gas came. He died three years later. Harishankar and his wife have no photographs of their dead boy in their possession, and they ask Sathyu if he can find the negative of the photo he took. Then they will use the small vial of chemical to make of positive of their boy's negative, with only 10 minutes of sunlight.