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Book Review--The Bhopal Reader: Remembering Twenty Years of the World's Worst Industrial Disaster

by William Baue

A collection of primary and secondary sources spanning the twenty-year quest for corporate accountability from Union Carbide and now Dow for the 1984 chemical leak that killed thousands upon thousands.

SocialFunds.com -- "There is very little to eat. Very little to wear. Papa just doesn't get a job. He has no permanent job. Before the leak, he used to work on a boring machine. Now he cannot work on that machine.

"Carbide must be punished. Take them to the police station. Then hit them and then jail them--those Carbide fellows. I can't play. I am weak. My hands and legs ache when I run. I get breathless soon. If I run I fall down immediately."

So said Suresh, an eight-year old student from the city of Bhopal, India, in the aftermath of the December 2-3, 1984 leakage of 80,000 pounds of methyl isocyanate (MIC, an ingredient of the pesticide Sevin) from the Union Carbide plant that killed up to 10,000 overnight. Children have an uncanny sense of truth-telling.

So, too, does the *Bhopal Reader*, a remarkable and devastating compendium of primary and secondary sources on the disaster. It reprints the charge sheet, arrest warrant, and bail bond for then-Carbide Chair Warren Anderson. Although he was indeed taken to a police station, he was not jailed, and both Mr. Anderson and Union Carbide have been pronounced "absconders" by Indian courts for failing to this day to appear to face charges of culpable homicide, the equivalent of manslaughter in the US. "Those Carbide fellows" have never fully faced the consequences for their role in the disaster, while Suresh (if she survived) and her fellow Bhopal residents live every day with the consequences, which include contaminated water and soil and inadequate medical attention.

The book brings the issue very close to the present, as it also reprints the January 6, 2005 order from the Bhopal Chief Judicial Magistrate asking Dow Chemical (ticker: DOW), which acquired Union Carbide in 2001, to present the absconders. Ward Morehouse, one of the book's editors, is asking Dow the same question today at its annual meeting, appearing as a representative of socially responsible investment (SRI) firm Boston Common Asset Management to read a letter that the company has failed to respond to before now.

The book touches on shareholder activism as the latest in 20 years of activism asking Union Carbide to assume accountability for the disaster. Boston Common submitted a shareholder resolution asking Dow to address the legacy of the Bhopal disaster last year. When it did so again this year, Dow petitioned the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for permission to omit the resolution on technical grounds, according to Lauren Compere, chief administrative officer at Boston Common.

"The resolution was omitted this year because we essentially reversed the supporting statement and the resolve clause--that was it," Ms. Compere told SocialFunds.com. "The SEC ruled that we were asking about future liability which we have no business doing...."

This position of subverting corporate accountability is completely consistent with the tactics presented throughout the book, as Union Carbide and now Dow seek to do the absolute minimum in taking responsibility for the disaster. Through the course of the book, the reader feels a slow accretion of information that makes it impossible to comprehend the current position of Dow's refusal to accept accountability.

The book documents how the tragedy started years before the actual gas leak, as internal Union Carbide documents reveal how the Bhopal plant was inferior to its sister plant in the United States, and how the company was well aware of multiple safety breaches. The company was warned, both internally and externally, of the risk the plant posed to the surrounding population.

"Phosgene gas that was used by Hitler in his gas chambers, and that is used for the production of methyl isocyanate, is stored in a tank in this factory and if that leaks or explodes it will take one to one and half hour for the death of the entire population of the city," wrote Rajkumar Keswani in the October 1, 1982 edition of *Rapat Weekly*, two years before the disaster.

The book also reprints Union Carbide and Dow documents and explanations, but the companies' attempts to bolster their case against legal liability only serves to increase their moral liability in the reader's eyes (to borrow concepts advanced by SustainAbility in a recent report). One of the most devastating sections in a book filled with sections that brought this reviewer to tears is "Moral orientations to suffering," a 1995 essay by Delhi University professor Veena Das. The essay points out how the aftermath of the disaster essentially re-victimized the victims while absolving Union Carbide of its culpability.

In the end, the strength of the stories related in each of the sections cohere to become something much larger than a book, and more of a catalyst for readers to abandon complacency.

"I guess I am now expected to make my point, elaborate on the meaning of the stories, draw upon their interconnectedness and present a framework that holds them together," writes Satinath Sarangi, another of the book's editors, in an essay reprinted in the text. "That would, however, be straying away from why I really wanted to tell these stories."

"Why I really began telling these stories was to move you, dear reader, to action. Twenty years is much too long and we have had a lot of words," he continues. "No more interpretations, no more words--the point is to stop the medical disaster in Bhopal."