

The Peoples' Movement in Bhopal
By Satinath Sarangi
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Spontaneous Protests

The collective response of the survivors over the last ten years appears to have gone through three distinct phases-- spontaneous protests in the immediate aftermath, organised under middle class leaders for the following two years and finally the formation of survivor led organisations. The first started with an angry march and a gathering of over one thousand survivors at the factory gates of the Union Carbide on the morning of the disaster. They had hardly any information on who was running the factory and how, and even less on its hazardous nature. When the marchers reached the factory a decision was taken to burn it down. The factory officials in panic spread a rumour that the gases had started leaking again. In confusion, the crowd fled away from the factory in an re-enactment of the previous night's mass panic. Spontaneous collective protests, mostly leaderless, continued in different communities without any overall inter-community organisation. In small groups, survivors demonstrated at government offices calling for medical care, monetary assistance and immediate hanging of the killers of Bhopal whose names, and particularly that of the chairman of the corporation, were widely known within the first three days.

With the declaration of Operation Faith—the neutralisation of the remaining toxic chemicals—there was once again widespread fear and chaos from December 10, 1984. Over 400,000 survivors left Bhopal in less than two days. Small numbers opted to stay at the government relief camps set up in new Bhopal. The camps provided a place for the survivors from different communities to come together and protest against the near absence of government efforts to provide relief and care. Hundreds of people marched to the governor's residence on December 16 and then again two days later. A small number of Bhopal activists played a role in facilitating collective decisions and action. By the end of the month these activities were to arrogate more powers to themselves and initiate the second phase of the movement in Bhopal in which spontaneous protests found encouragement only on rare occasions.

Organised Response

Within the first week of the disaster, about thirty individuals with varying leftist persuasions met in two groups to found two organisations—Nagarik Rahat Aur Punarvas Committee (NRPC) and the Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangharsh Morcha (ZGKSM or Morcha for short) with distinct agendas. Though a few locals were involved in the founding of the organisations, out of town and new-Bhopal activists played a dominant role in outlining the respective “politics” of the organisations. For NRPC, provision of relief and rehabilitation was to be the main issue. The Morcha, or more correctly its leaders, stressed the need for a political organisation of the survivors that would take up issues of justice, access to scientific information, medical care, and legal intervention. Though there was reason and space for both organisations to co-exist and support each other's work, internecine conflicts started brewing from their inception.

Survivor-led Organisations

Left to fend for themselves after the exodus of the middle class leaders and activists, the survivors were soon to organise themselves to continue with the struggle in Bhopal. Initially concerned with immediate problems of jobs, pensions for destitutes and regularising of employment at rehabilitation centres, the four organisations that formed were soon to take up medical care, monetary relief, criminal liability, compensation, environmental rehabilitation and corruption by government officials as their rallying points. The organisations grew in strength and effectiveness and two of them—Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan and Nirashrit Pension Bhogi Sangharsh Morcha--had over 100,000 members within the first two years of their formation.

While these organisations resembled the earlier ones in size, range of concerns and ability to pressure the government, as things turned out, their resemblance did not end there. In fact, these organisations resembled traditional Indian extended families in many of their features and their leaders had even less respect for democratic functioning. Conflicts between organisations grew as their leaders competed with each other to be the sole representative of the survivors. In contrast with organisations formed earlier, women outnumbered men several times over. Defying traditions of their respective religions and family bondage, Muslim and Hindu women survivors played an active and sustained role in the organisations. However, the two largest organisations came to be dominated by men with few scruples about usurping female power for their personal glory.

Conscious of the need for research, documentation and monitoring activities as they were, the survivors' organisations in the third phase did not have the necessary skill and training to be able to carry them out. Dissemination of information was limited to the minimum required for immediate mobilisation of people around particular issues. The involvement of a large number of women presented the possibility of organising their wide ranging production skills into income generating co-operatives. However, the organisations chose to depend upon and pressure the government into providing jobs to the Bhopal survivors. Even the closure of the sewing centres by the government in July 1992, did not prompt any initiatives for helping survivors to become self supporting. With time the two major organisations became involved with party politics and the popular response to the disaster was almost back to the traditional politics of Bhopal.

Given these serious shortcomings, the later day survivors' organisations have had significant achievements. Much needed monetary assistance from the government, modification of the infamous settlement order, withdrawal of criminal immunity from Carbide and its officials and most government relief and rehabilitative measures have been made possible through their legal and extralegal interventions. Above all, through their continuing marches and rallies demanding justice and a better deal for the survivors, they have kept Bhopal alive in the public mind.