

WORLD NEWS

Slums Sprawl in Shadow of Bhopal Gas Leak

Indians Eke Out Living 12 Years After Disaster Despite Suspected Contamination of Water, Soil

By Kenneth J. Cooper
Washington Post Foreign Service

BHOPAL, India
The three visitors climbed atop the circular concrete rim, peered down and sniffed the deep darkness of the polluted well across the street from the closed Union Carbide plant.

Almost immediately, voices cackling in Hindi interrupted the inspection. The visitors turned their heads toward a group of young boys who were lined up along a nearby wall.

"This is the well of death," the boys said.

They were laughing.

This bit of macabre humor did not surprise the guide, an environmental activist who has frequented the Jayprakashnagar slum, where the accidental release of poisonous gas from the Union Carbide pesticide plant in 1984 continues to take lives.

When slum children play house, one child ends the game by pretending to release noxious gas, causing the other participants to start coughing before they fall to the ground and lie still, as if dead.

It is a morbid game for a morbid place. "How else do you cope with it?" asked Satinath Sarangi, the guide.

A dozen years after a toxic tragedy killed more than 4,000 people in Bhopal and damaged the health of 500,000 more, families still live just outside the barbed-wire fence surrounding the plant, which shut down after the methyl isocyanate gas was released. New slums have sprouted nearby on abandoned farmlands whose yields dropped sharply in the aftermath of the accident.

Sarangi and other activists have been working to focus attention on suspected contamination of the water and soil by toxic waste discharged from the plant, which began operating in the 1970s. Potable municipal water does flow from the taps in Jayprakashnagar each morning but for less than 30 minutes, according to residents.

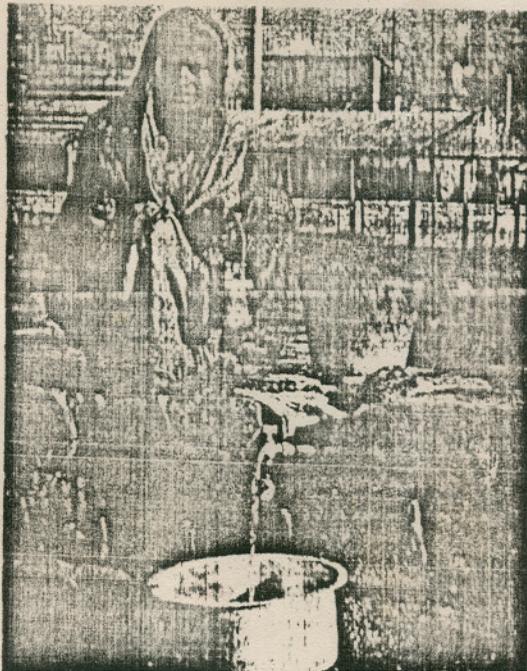
"There are so many water problems here," said Begum Bee, 45. "We're helpless; we have to use water from the well." Residents said they suspect two wells are polluted. One is not used because the stone wall around it has collapsed, spilling dirt into the bottom. But water is still drawn from "the well of death."

"It's not used for drinking; it's used for washing," said Babu Lal, a shopkeeper. "It has a foul smell."

When other water is not available, residents fill their pots at a distant well rather than drink from the polluted one. "Why would we want to drink it? We don't want to die," Lal said.

Even washing with the well water, Lal said, has caused minor health problems. While adults report a temporary itching and burning sensation, blisters have appeared on the tender skin of children.

The slum dwellers talked freely about their water problems, but they have grown weary of years of relentless questioning about gas-related deaths



FILE PHOTO/ASSOCIATED PRESS



BY BRAD WYI
—THE WASHINGTON POST

In February 1985, two months after the gas leak that killed more than 4,000 people, a woman filled cans with water from a well in front of the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India.

by government officials, medical researchers and journalists. Sarangi warned the visitors not to ask such questions.

The nongovernmental organization that Sarangi leads, the Sambavna Trust, has been carefully asking such sensitive questions to compile medical information about the causes of recent deaths. To compensate for inadequate government record-keeping, the group has been using a medical questionnaire to conduct "verbal autopsies" on deceased persons by interviewing the people who last provided care for them.

The novel technique has been used in Africa to track such health problems as AIDS and establish infant mortality rates. Sarangi hopes to persuade Indian courts to admit the findings as evidence of further Union Carbide corporate liability.

Later this summer, the Sambavna Trust plans to set up a free clinic that will offer alternatives to the antibiotics, steroids and tranquilizers usually prescribed for ailing survivors of the gas leak. Instead of what he called "irrational medication," Sarangi said the clinic would offer other drug therapies, traditional Indian medicine and "cure by yoga."

On one side of the closed factory, which is being disassembled for resale, four deep pits that were once used to store chemical wastes are being filled with dirt. One has been sealed. A tractor has lev-

eled the dry bottom of two others, ripping apart its black plastic liner.

The visitors watched as women and children from Atal Ayub Nagar, a shantytown built on abandoned farmland nearby, scrambled down the steep slopes to collect the plastic scraps, even though one study found that the pits contain cancer-causing and liver-damaging agents.

Sultan Ahmed Khan, 15, walked away with a roll of plastic on his back. "I'm taking it for my roof so the water doesn't come in. We bought new plastic but were running short of it," he said.

"More contamination," Sarangi sighed.

Khan and other slum dwellers scavenged the plastic to prepare for the coming monsoon rains, which also contribute to the pollution problems in this hilly city of 1 million. Babulal Gaur, a former state minister, said the rains cause chemical residues to seep deeper into the soil.

"During the monsoon, it just enters the ground water," Gaur said. "The animals and the people, they fall sick because of the water."

The seasonal monsoon rains, which many Indians welcome as relief from summer's heat, are due in Bhopal and other cities.

Special correspondent Ram Lakshmi contributed to this report.