
THE SPARKPLUG

Vol. 1 Issue 4

Encouraging inappropriate “moods” of publishing.

December 2020 - #1

Of what use is memory?

The Union Carbide gas explosion in Bhopal still lingers, 36 years later

By Lital Khaikin

A persistent ghost

Though occurring all too frequently, few industrial tragedies have imprinted so strongly on international struggles against multinational corporations as the gas explosion in Bhopal.

On December 2, 1984 a pesticide plant, formerly owned by American chemical company Union Carbide, exploded in Bhopal. The walls of a storage warehouse collapsed, leaking methyl isocyanate (MIC) into the air. MIC, also known as chloromethane, is a clear and colourless irritant that penetrates skin and targets the nervous system, can cause seizures and paralysis, reproductive toxicity, and long-term damage to internal organs. Within four months, over 1,400 people had died. Up to 25,000 are known to have died from gas and contaminant exposure in the years that followed. In a humiliating exercise of incompetency, the state government of Madhya Pradesh has still not removed over 300 tonnes of toxic waste that is entombed in the old factory.

In 1979, zoning regulations were [changed](#)¹ to allow the plant to be set up in a densely populated area. Years of warnings to the Madhya Pradesh administration about the dangers of the Bhopal plant went unheeded. Years of gas leaks leading to hospitalizations and deaths went ignored before the ultimate tragedy occurred.

The Arthur D. Little Report (1988), produced by a consulting firm hired by Union Carbide, considered the possibility that blame for the explosion should be placed on sabotage by an employee. Union Carbide decried how the Indian government prevented the company’s investigative contractors from speaking to the plant’s employees, which it perceived as impeding the investigation. Yet there was little acknowledgement of the pressure or intimidation – direct or implicit – that workers might feel being questioned by investigators who were being paid by Union Carbide.

The [Jackson Browning Report](#)² (1993), which was the second report produced by Union Carbide, also referred to a disgruntled employee, while chastising the Indian government for pursuing criminal charges against the company’s executives, emphasizing how the government pursued its original claim of \$3 billion – which the US company had pushed down to a settlement of \$470 million.

As historian and journalist Vijay Prashad [wrote](#)³ in 2014, the CEO of Union Carbide was never brought to justice before his death – for the cost-cutting and negligence of his company, or for the Indian government’s charge against him for “culpable homicide”. Today, the plant is owned by Michigan-based Dow Chemical and, though the disaster appears to have disappeared from public memory in North America, the survivors of the Bhopal explosion continue to suffer the consequences of this tragedy.

Continues on page 2 →

Pesticides and Poverty: The smoldering legacy of Bhopal

This edition of *The Sparkplug* commemorates the legacy of the tragic gas explosion that shook Bhopal on December 2, 1984, and critiques the role of neocolonial development by corrupt governments and corporate cronies. Featured in this issue is an interview with Montreal-based playwright and theatrical director Rahul Varma, who wrote the events into a play called *Bhopal* (premiered in 2001), as well as Toronto-based academic and theatre critic Rohan Kulkarni.

With industrial disasters like Bhopal, their memories too often, too quickly, disappear in the years of legal challenges, promises for environmental remediation and paltry pay-offs to the victims by the corporations (if they pay at all). The conversation included in this issue takes Varma’s play *Bhopal* as a point of departure for the conversation it stoked within Canada’s cultural milieu on the legacy of the Union Carbide explosion in India.

The Bhopal tragedy had an important role in awakening the world to the urgency of industrial pollution in the 80s. As global media surged and connected international communities with anti-corporate and anti-globalization movements, corporations revealed growing insecurity with the energetic pursuit of investigative journalists.

A telling quote by Ashok Kaleklar and Arthur D. Little, from a 1988 report on the Bhopal explosion, states: “In recent years, the news media with their surfeit of investigative reporters have become a predictable presence at the site of an incident.” This “surfeit” proved to be a massive inconvenience for their employer.

Today, as much as we are awash with mass media that churns out headlines by the micro-second, we have never been in such a forgetful period of history. We’ve become dependent on algorithms to tell us what to care about and remember, and take for granted that today’s history is indeed being recorded, and not overwritten or deleted. A hundred years from now, where will our memory and our lessons be stored, and how will they be revisited, if at all?

For the memory of Bhopal, as for the continuity of the industrial disaster’s legacy, enterprising recorders of history may borrow the words of Arthur D. Little himself – the founder of the consulting firm that was eventually hired by Union Carbide: “Other people’s troubles are our business”.

LK.

Continued:

Of what use is memory?

The breaking wheel of neocolonialism

It is often on the basis of providing opportunities for a so-called "better quality of life" that companies like Dow Chemical have been allowed to set up their operations, while actually exploiting lax labour, environmental and taxation regulations in their host countries. As Indian farmers rise in popular protest against the country's neoliberal [land reforms](#)⁴ in late November, the story of Bhopal is both commemorative and remains urgent within wider anti-corporate movements.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has based his policies on a vision of [Atmanirbhar Bharat](#)⁵—an economically self-reliant (or, depending on the translation, "self-sufficient") India that emphasizes local manufacturing and production. Reflecting a global surge of right-wing populism, this principle also intersects with the right-wing [Hindutva nationalism](#)⁶ that has characterized the Prime Minister's tenure; but more so, it is incongruously positioned alongside the proclamations that India is "open for business". This summer has seen Modi escalate his calls for US investment across many sectors, from military and aviation, to technology and data analytics, to the pharmaceutical industry, to energy and infrastructure. As the US has pledged over \$40 billion in 2020 alone, Modi [flaunted](#)⁷ the incentives India has made for private investment.

Yet in a national climate that Modi has referred to as "a perfect combination of openness, opportunities and options", residents of Bhopal beg to differ on this official line of optimism.

When former US President Donald Trump visited Bhopal in February 2020, activists with two local organizations known as Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationery Karamchari Sangh, and Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Purush Sangharsh Morcha, brought attention to the corporate and military interests that motivate US-India dealings, and the US government's sheltering of Dow Chemical from responsibility. Among many other instances, these activist groups have also [spoken out](#)⁸ against local government corruption for the misappropriation of compensation meant for survivors.

Trump's trip to Bhopal received little attention in western media, but protests flared across Madhya Pradesh in opposition to predatory US investment, as well as the silence on Bhopal. Quoted in *India Today* in February, Rachna Dhingra of the Bhopal Group for Information and Action [described](#)⁹ how the US Department of Justice has refused two summons by the Bhopal district court to Dow Chemical "on charges of corporate manslaughter" since Trump's election in 2016.

The legacy of Union Carbide and Dow Chemical in Bhopal recalls the decades of anti-colonial struggle in mid-19th century India, where states sought to shake off the hold of British occupiers and the exploitation and slave trade of the East India Company. By 1956, the formerly independent state of Bhopal had merged with Madhya Pradesh and Vindhya Pradesh, and ultimately integrated into greater India—the city of Bhopal becoming the capital of the present-day state of Madhya Pradesh. Today, the larger picture of the region's development is determined not by local priorities and interests, but by those directed from Modi's government, and corporate liaisons, in New Delhi. And not even thirty years after integration, the government of Madhya Pradesh would assume responsibility for the clean-up after yet another multinational corporation that sacrificed people for profit.

What has really changed in the imperialist shuffle through an India that is "open for business", since Dow Chemical took over operations for Union Carbide? Pesticides are an incredibly lucrative market, [worth](#)¹⁰ over \$50 billion in 2019 alone. Growing global food demands, and the cumulative pressures of climate change on food and industrial crops, contribute to a market increase that is [expected](#)¹¹ to reach over \$88 billion within seven years. Union Carbide's own report from 1993 described its plant, which manufactured Sevin and Temik pesticides, as having "humane goals" to "transform" India's agricultural sector and "[grow] national economies around the world".

The social and economic disparity of this corporate abuse is stark. Bhopal has consistently [ranked](#)¹² among the regions with the highest proportion of people living below the poverty line in India, with a ratio of 33%. Not unlike the exploitation under British colonial rule and the East India Company, this dependence on polluting industries is modern slavery, and the price to work is health and life itself.

THE PRICE OF OPPORTUNITY

Economic development doesn't come cheap! Everybody knows the adage: no pain, no gain. For the investors of these major operations, risk and loss is just a part of the game.

CHARLESTON, TENNESSEE, USA - Wacker chemical plant

On **November 13, 2020**, a polysilicone factory (Wacker Chemie AG) producing for solar panels and semi-conductors exploded, killing one and injuring three people. The explosion sent over 1700 pounds of hydrochloric acid into the air.

QUZHOU, ZHEJIANG, CHINA - Quzhou chemical plant

On **November 9, 2020**, a chemical explosion at a plant known as the Transit Fluorine Silicon Material Co. Ltd exploded, carrying toxic smoke over 100 km away to the city of Shangrao.

TINSUKIA, ASSAM, INDIA - Baghjan oilfield

In **November 2020**, the fire at Oil India Limited's Baghjan oilfield was finally extinguished after burning for 6 months, caused by leaking gas.

BHARUCH, GUJARAT, INDIA - Dahej chemical factory

On **June 3, 2020**, the Yashashvi Rasayan Private Ltd. pesticide factory, owned by the Patel Group, exploded injuring over 70 people and killing 10. The youngest victim was 19-year old Arun Kori and the oldest was 38-year old Munna Singh Shivprasad Singh, the others being in their twenties.

VISAKHAPATNAM, ANDRA PRADESH, INDIA - LG Polymers chemical plant

On **May 6, 2020**, a South Korean owned LG Polymers chemical plant leaked styrene gas, killing 12 people. The company used improper storage and ignored the red flags of rising polymer content.

YANCHENG, JIANGSU, CHINA - Tianjiayi Chemical plant

In **March 2019**, a pesticide plant exploded in Yancheng. 78 people were reported to have lost their lives, with over 600 injured. The plant was owned by Jiangsu Tianjiayi Chemical Co.

PORT NECHES, TEXAS, USA - Port Neches chemical plant

On **November 27, 2019**, a petrochemical plant owned by Houston-based TPC Group exploded, injuring three and causing the evacuation of 60,000 people. The TPC Group had reported major spikes in highly flammable and carcinogenic emissions of [butadiene](#) (used to make rubber and plastics) from October until the explosion.

OUR WORLD IS SPEAKING, AND
THE CHEMICAL MAGNATES WANT
YOU TO KNOW THEY ARE
LISTENING

TO NATURE

Mr. Fitterling, the honourable CEO of Dow Chemical, knows that we must all "listen to nature" for things to get better. Dow Chemical leads the change from the inside, with its Valuing Nature sustainability plan for 2025 encompassing "business-driven projects that enhance nature"! And since "culture matters more than ever before", Mr. Fitterling and his esteemed company believe the way forward to a better future is a more inclusive and diverse culture of plastics and pesticides magnates and their underlings! Remember, if you work hard enough, you too can maybe get daycare solutions as a valued employee for a company that Values Nature to the tune of \$43 billion in profits for 2019 alone! Nothing in life is guaranteed!

Continued:

Of what use is memory?

The time that time takes to decay

Decades of headlines since 1984 relate a lack of closure, documenting how the fall-out from Bhopal is “still unfolding”, with an “endless wait for a clean-up”. In the immediate aftermath, the toxic MIC gas spread over at least 40 sq km around the Union Carbide factory. A 2010 [report](#)¹³ by Venkata Raman Dhara of the International Medical Commission on Bhopal and epidemiologist Rosaline Dhara parsed through the findings of numerous medical studies in the aftermath of the explosion. The researchers note that while the high mortality rates that followed the early years of the explosion declined over time, thousands still died through the 1990s as a direct result of gas exposure.

At the time of the explosion, the highest point of exposure for people would have been to the MIC gas through the eyes and respiratory system. Thirty six years later, however, Bhopal is experiencing what has been referred to by the [Bhopal Medical Appeal](#)¹⁴ as a “second poisoning”. Chlorinated benzenes, which are present in the soil surrounding the former plant, cause damage to bone marrow and lead to leukemia. Carbon tetrachloride and heavy metals like arsenic, cadmium, lead, and mercury all cause organ and nerve damage through prolonged exposure that far surpasses the immediate fall-out of the Union Carbide explosion.

How much more unjust this cumulative trauma is today, when the disproportionate burden carried by the poor is amplified by the Indian government’s negligent response to COVID-19, as survivors of the Bhopal tragedy are [reported](#)¹⁵ to make up a disproportionate number of COVID victims—a virus that attacks the respiratory system and can cause permanent internal organ damage.

As the living memory of survivors fades through age, illness and death, future generations must still confront the long resonance of such disasters.

A comparable study of the fall-out of chemical warfare came in journalist Laura Gottesdiener’s [recent report](#)¹⁶ for *The Nation*, in which she wrote about the devastating health consequences of depleted uranium munitions in the US bombing of Fallujah, Iraq in 2004, and the compounded effects of industrial development in the region. Documenting the Sisyphean efforts of Iraqi pediatricians to heal and mend amid the epidemic of birth defects that have ravaged Fallujah, Gottesdiener describes how the toxicity of depleted uranium has contributed to new generations being born with cancers, neurological disorders and birth defects. However, the toxicity of the US munitions—dropped between the 1991 Gulf War and the 2004 invasion of Iraq—fits into a larger picture of manufacturing in the Iraqi city, where chemical warehouses and military manufacturing sites have contributed their own seepage of cyanide, lead, and other heavy metals.

Crucially, the production of pesticides is inseparable from such larger narratives of chemical warfare. How is it possible to forget the Nazi testing of Zyklon-B on the millions of Jews, leftists, Russians, Romani, LGBTQ, and disabled peoples who were victims of the Holocaust? Or the [human testing](#)¹⁷ of defoliants and pesticides between 1936-1945 in Japan, the latter particularly conducted under the command of Dr. Wakamutsu Yujiro? Dow Chemical itself infamously developed the defoliant Agent Orange and the napalm bombs that were rained over Vietnam. In the 1990s, Dow also notoriously came under public scrutiny for the company’s secret human experimentation in the ‘60s on inmates at the Holmesburg Philadelphia prison. Dow Chemical and the US Department of Defense had contracted Albert Kligman, a dermatologist and inventor of the anti-acne serum Retin-A. While testing cosmetic products on prisoners, Kligman also exposed prisoners to dioxin, a blistering agent that was used in Agent Orange.

The testing of pesticides and herbicides continues today with normalized animal abuse that hasn’t provoked any wide sense of urgency or intersectional analysis beyond that of animal rights groups. As just one example, in 2019, Dow AgroSciences (now Corteva Agriscience) was forced to end chemical testing it was conducting on dogs who were [force-fed](#)¹⁸ pesticides multiple times a day.

Chemical companies are deftly aware of this inseparable development of commercial pesticides, military testing and unethical experimentation. Their executives have sought to separate their products from these legacies by greenwashing mission statements and obfuscating their expansionism behind palatable [identity politics](#)¹⁹.

To confront this continuity between corporate neocolonialism, environmental pollution, and the military-industrial complex is to see the poisoning at Bhopal—and that of other industrial tragedies—as an act of warfare.

What else is this poisoning but a form of chemical warfare that is waged against the poorest among us, and against a planet that we take for granted? As survivors of the Bhopal gas explosion continue to pursue justice, international activists, artists and writers have kept their memory and calls alive. We are witness to the unravelling of the pollution in the decades that follow us, and carry the responsibility to preserve history at a time when our instruments of memory corrupt both accuracy and longevity.

∞

References:

1. [“Bhopal disaster: The ignored warnings?”](#), NDTV, June 14, 2010.
2. Jackson B. Browning (Retired Vice President, Health, Safety, and Environmental Programs), Union Carbide Corporation, [“Union Carbide: Disaster at Bhopal”](#), 1993.
3. Vijay Prashad, [“Tears for Bhopal”](#), Counterpunch, October 31, 2014.
4. Sheikh Saaliq, [“Unfazed Indian Farmers Continue Protest Against New Laws”](#), *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2020.
5. Udit Misra, [“Atmanirbhar Bharat: A brief and not-so-affectionate history”](#), *The Indian Express*, August 17, 2020.
6. Ravinder Kaur, [“Modi’s capitalist dystopia: How liberal market stokes new India’s illiberal democracy”](#), *The Caravan*, November 1, 2020.
7. [“PM lists out potential sectors for US investors, says India could power global eco recovery”](#), *The Economic Times*, July 23, 2020.
8. [“34 years on, Bhopal gas tragedy survivors continue to fight for rehabilitation”](#), *The Tribune*, December 2, 2018.
9. [“Protests in Bhopal, Indore against Trump’s visit”](#), *India Today*, via Press Trust of India, February 25, 2020.
10. [“Crop Protection Chemicals \(Pesticides\) Market 2020”](#), Market Reports World, via WFMJ, August 17, 2020.
11. [“Global Pesticides Market Outlook \(2019 to 2027\) - Featuring BASF, Bayer & DowDuPont Among Others”](#), *Business Wire*, August 14, 2020.
12. Sidarth Yadav, [“No effect on poverty in MP despite high growth rate: Finance panel”](#), *The Hindu*, July 5, 2019.
13. Dhara, Venkata Ramana & Dhara, Rosaline. (2010). [The Union Carbide Disaster in Bhopal: A Review of Health Effects](#). Archives of environmental health. 57. 391-404.
14. Bhopal Medical Appeal, [Bhopal’s Second Poisoning](#).
15. [“After gas leak tragedy, Bhopal victims fall prey to virus”](#), Bangkok Post, May 29, 2020.
16. Laura Gottesdiener, [“The Children of Fallujah: The Medical Mystery at the Heart of the Iraq War”](#), *The Nation*, November 9, 2020.
17. Sheldon D. Harris, [Japanese Biomedical Experimentation During the World War II Era](#), *Military Medical Ethics*, Volume 2. 463-506.
18. M. Carrie Allen, [“Undercover investigation finds dogs suffering in lab experiments”](#), *The Humane Society of the United States*, March 12, 2019.

On Bhopal, Memory & Documentary Theatre with

Rahul Varma & Rohan Kulkarni

As a work of documentary theatre, Rahul Varma's Bhopal holds space in the Canadian dramaturgical canon as an international response to the gas explosion, and a living work of history that can be kept alive in ways that journalism is often denied – by remembering, and revisiting. This text combines email exchanges with Montreal-based playwright and theatre director Varma and Rohan Kulkarni, a Toronto-based theatre critic and professor.

LK: It's been 36 years since the Bhopal tragedy. What is the significance of marking the Bhopal disaster for you, and what do you think about the way the disaster has been retained in public memory since then?

RAHUL: The consequences of the Bhopal disaster are intergenerational. Many young girls who survived the 1984 explosion are grown women now and giving birth to horribly deformed babies. Who would have thought that babies would be inheriting deformities from their own mothers because the mothers were forced to inhale poisoned gas three and a half decades ago?

Thousands have become disabled and suffer the ravages of respiratory disease, madness, cancer, and other unidentified illnesses. Many born after the explosion are born with severe birth defects and disabilities.

While the Bhopal disaster continues to torment people, neither the defunct Union Carbide nor its new owner Dow Chemical, and nor the successive US and Indian governments have adequately addressed the problem. Grass root activism, NGOs such as Sambhavna Trust, and environmental justice organizations such as Greenpeace have kept the memory and lessons of Bhopal alive. In the field of arts and culture, Teesri Duniya Theatre is among the few theatre companies that have kept memories of Bhopal alive.

LK: How would you characterize the way the disaster has been retained in public memory – especially abroad, where people benefit from the products produced by such chemical factories?

ROHAN: Growing up in India in the 1990s, I remember Bhopal being a significant part of the conversation as the country opened its doors to corporation after Western corporation, desperate to keep up with the speed of globalization. Bhopal was still somewhat fresh in people's minds – a warning about the potential human cost of India's economic competitiveness. In the international context, the Bhopal gas disaster has unfortunately not been retained over the decades.

ROHAN: It hasn't lived on in public memory in the way, for example, Chernobyl has. No award-winning HBO series have been made about Bhopal. This is especially sad when you think about the fact that the disastrous effects of the explosion are still unfolding.

LK: Tell me a bit about your personal motivation and experience composing Bhopal?

RAHUL: I first learnt about this explosion from television reports in Montreal. I saw images of mass destruction of lives – Bhopal city was littered with dead bodies and bodies gripped in pain. These horrifying images of destruction relayed directly into our drawing rooms hugely disturbed me. It raised the question “why did this have to happen”, and then “how do I respond?”

The quest for response was precipitated by the image of a child named Zarina, which I saw in a documentary film called *Bhopal: Beyond Genocide* by Tapan Bose and Suhasini Mulay. The film traced the 18 days [of the] short life of Zarina, who was one of thousands of babies born after the explosion.

The film showed the heart-wrenching body of Zarina – her heaving ribcage and her collapsed heart that could be seen through the lesion on her melting skin. Her autopsy report said, “Poisoned in her mother's womb”.

I asked myself if Zarina had lived longer, how would she describe her pain? Well, she didn't live and at 18 days, she was too young to say anything.

What could have been said, then, became my creative response culminating in the form a play, *Bhopal* which was later translated into Hindi as *Zahreeli Hawa* by iconic director, the late Habib Tanvir. It was also translated in French by Paul Lefebvre and in Punjabi as *Khamosh Chiragan Di Daastan* by Kewal Dhaliwal.

LK: Catastrophes like the Bhopal pesticide plant explosion tend to fade from memory quickly, even though their consequences remain for decades—seeping into land and water, absorbing into our bodies, and poisoning the air. Here in Canada we can think of the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster which spilled crude oil in the Eastern Townships only a few years ago, or the persistent pollution of Limoilou, a neighbourhood in Quebec City where heavy metals are blown from the city's nickel-transporting port. Sometimes the extent of contamination from such disasters, and the consequences on all forms of life in the polluted environment, are not immediately evident. What do you think about this aspect of the “slow time” of a catastrophe, where the real damage may not be known until many years after?

RAHUL: The consequences of industrial disasters, environmental catastrophes, nuclear explosions, and radioactive spills are long-lasting, intergenerational, and often not known because the multinationals collude with the state and withhold information.

Excerpt from statement by International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB)

“Survivor Organizations Demand Compensation for Long Term Injuries as COVID-19 Shows High Death Rate”. [Statement published](#) on ICJB website by Guneet Narula. November 24, 2020.

““The Pandemic has exposed the official lie that 93% of those exposed to Union Carbide's poisonous gases had only temporary injuries.” said Rashida Bee, President of the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationery Karmchari Sangh. “We have official records that show that the gas exposed population, that is 17% of the district's population of 2.8 million, has contributed to 56% of the COVID-19 deaths in the district so far.

Rachna Dhingra of the Bhopal Group for Information & Action said that Union Carbide's own documents state that the injuries caused by exposure to Methyl Isocyanate are permanent in nature yet more than 90% of the exposed people have been paid only 500 US dollars compensation for temporary injuries.

“Dow Chemical has used the Pandemic to cut thousands of jobs and make more profit by producing hand sanitizers, but it looks the other way when the Pandemic exposes the lasting damage its subsidiary caused in Bhopal. Dow Chemical continues to evade the pending civil, criminal and environmental liabilities of Union Carbide in Bhopal.” Said Nausheen Khan of Children Against Dow Carbide.”

MORTALITY RATES [Collected by ICJB](#)

POPULATION OF BHOPAL DISTRICT IN 2020: 2,800,000 (Census data)

No. of people injured by gas exposure: 568,293 (Office of the Welfare Commission-Bhopal gas victims)

POPULATION OF GAS VICTIMS IN BHOPAL DISTRICT IN 2020: 463,050

No. of COVID 19 deaths in Bhopal District: 450 (Corona Health Bulletin of Dept of Health & Family Welfare, Govt of MP-as 18 October 2020)

No. of COVID 19 deaths of gas exposed persons in Bhopal District: 254 (BMHRC Smart card or compensation order copy)

Continues on page 5 →

Continued: On Bhopal, Memory & Documentary Theatre with

Rahul Varma & Rohan Kulkarni

RAHUL: Dow Chemical was commissioned by the US government to produce napalm and Agent Orange during Vietnam War, little is known about its consequences. The dreadful consequences of MIC continue on lives of those who “survived” Bhopal disaster.

There is a similarity in Lac-Mégantic oil spill, and other such disasters, such as BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, with what happened in Bhopal. But there is a difference when it occurs in a developing country like India vs. when it happens close to home or the Western world. For example, Canadian Government acted on Lac-Mégantic oil spill and rebuilt the town. Similarly, President Obama ordered a criminal investigation and forced BP to set aside 20 billion in clean-up fund. In contrast, no such measures were taken in the case of Bhopal disaster and Agent Orange case.

No industry should be able to operate unless short and long-term safety has been assured.

LK: **Your play confronts the difficult reality of industrial conglomerates providing what they call “opportunities” for employment. It’s a delicate balance—rejecting the influence, interests and exploitation of multinational, private companies and their polluting industries, while actually developing opportunities for economic development and common enrichment of a community. How do you reconcile this contradiction?**

RAHUL: Economic development does not have to be at the expense of people’s safety and loss of life. Multinationals are interested in maximizing their profit, not developing economies. So, under the banner of developing economies and helping the poor, they eradicate the poor and pollute air, water and soil.

Lives and the health of people become the cost of such development. The Bhopal disaster of 1984 and the disaster at the garment factory in Bangladesh in 2013 – as well as famine, drought and soil erosion in between – confirm that respect for life and human rights are not at all concerns of the multinationals.

Plays like *Bhopal* remind the public what governments ignore, examine what is kept off public discourse and value human life over profit.

Rohan Kulkarni writes how “[n]eocolonialism manifests itself in the attitude of wealthy Indians towards the suffering of the poor in their immediate surroundings, because they are able to compartmentalize their empathy to focus on maintaining a good relationship with the American corporation.”

LK: **Could you talk about how economic divides and caste play into the integration of Union Carbide into the community, and the response of the Indian government in the aftermath?**

ROHAN: The economic and social elite in India profit off the exploitation of marginalized communities as much as Western corporations do. These are the people who are on the ground, navigating local bureaucracy and opening doors for companies like Carbide.

Economic and caste divides play into how much the government decides to prioritize the wellbeing of those being affected by the exploitative practices of Union Carbide. Once the government is adequately lobbied, the promise of economic investment is presented to the public as a no-brainer, even if it risks the safety of a certain segment of the population.

The discourse of progress is rampant and everyone wants a piece of the pie. Poor and largely illiterate people in slums are baited with the promise of wages and work to get them on board.

And if things go wrong, as they did in Bhopal, their lives are sadly not seen as valuable enough to warrant decisive steps to prevent further damage. The fact that in the aftermath of 1984, Union Carbide wasn’t ruthlessly prosecuted and driven out of the country for good, tells you all you need to know about who matters more to the Indian government.

LK: **Responding to Rahul Varma’s play, you also mentioned how “Language thus becomes the main tool of oppression” in the play, describing how the “top-down language of progress is employed by neocolonial powers to influence local leaders, who then convince the masses”. This hierarchical diffusion of information from authorities to the public is universal to governments that repress information to obscure who holds decision-making powers, and ultimately avoid accountability. Could you talk a bit about this dynamic of language?**

ROHAN: The process of globalization in the world’s largest democracy had to be snuck in with effective messaging – there was no other way. Following the economic boom and Green Revolution, conversation in government and the media was focused on India now being ‘ready’ to open up its economy and finally come into its own as a key player on the world stage.

ROHAN: Bhopal was a part of this. Politicians effectively argued for increased trade liberalization and relaxation of regulations, which led to a series of economic policy reforms throughout the 1980s. Detractors were told that if India didn’t wholeheartedly welcome foreign investment, it would lose out to neighbouring China and other developing countries.

This ‘race to the bottom’ was positioned as India needing to maintain its competitive edge. But when things went wrong, language was equally effective in obfuscating the truth of what happened in Bhopal. Between numerous lawsuits and investigations, various levels of government essentially found ways to blame each other and confuse the narrative. This was to the detriment of those seeking help and justice in the critical years following the disaster.

LK: **The previous issue of *The Sparkplug* looked at the nationalist movement in Kashmir—and the revocation of the state’s autonomous status by Narendra Modi’s government last year. Less often discussed on this side of the Atlantic is the role of British partition in dividing territories and defining contemporary India...but also, the impact this has had on New Delhi’s control over regional development. Bhopal had also sought independence, but was ultimately integrated into greater India. In what ways has this shaped industrial and economic development in Bhopal?**

RAHUL: Colonizing countries leave but not without leaving behind a painful legacy – ethnic strife and divided people. India was split into India and Pakistan along racial/religious lines. Yes, some princely states tried to separate but lacked support of the population, thus Bhopal remained integrated into India. However, the industrial and economic development of Bhopal had more to do with what Bhopal offered to the multinational than its one-time desire to separate. What Bhopal offered to the multinational was a well-built railway network, constant supply of water, cheap labour force and inflow of migrant workers, and above all lax safety laws.

There can no longer be any doubt that industrial disasters are a direct outcome of capitalist accumulation for the benefit of rich and upper classes, leaving ordinary working-class citizens in despair, poverty, and poor health within their own houses. To prevent this from happening is an urgent need, but the greater need is to dismantle the system that produces such disasters.

Continues on page 6 →

Continued: On Bhopal, Memory & the Responsibility of Theatre with

Rahul Varma & Rohan Kulkarni

LK: *Bhopal* is one example of documentary theatre that engages with an urgent and persistent humanitarian disaster, which, as we see, has not gone away. And documentary theatre is ultimately an aesthetic form of journalism or non-fiction narrative.

Journalism has increasingly been starkly separated from engagement with cultural discourse, and more broadly from “the masses”. It’s a consumer product whose creators, more than ever, emerge from an academic ivory tower that mechanically generates talking heads for the mainstream media. Yet, engagement with artistic and cultural milieus is, arguably, essential to “good journalism”—that is spirited and inspired, and connected with the humane pulse of society (and possibly even well-written).

We can think of Chris Hedge’s comprehensive depiction of political theatre in the U.S. – in his book *The Death of the Liberal Class* – and its engagement with civil rights movements in the late 60s and early 70s. Many of the productions and companies, from Barbara Ann Teer’s National Black Theatre, and Judith Malina and Julian Beck’s The Living Theatre, to the Open Theatre founded by Joseph Chaikin, as well as the Bread and Puppet Theatre and Theatre for the New City ... All of these were at the forefront of social movements, including the civil-rights and Black liberation movements, protesting the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War. How do you see the role of political theatre today in social discourse, and its relationship with journalism, and agitating the masses?

RAHUL: First, to the question on documentary theatre – as you say documentary theatre is an aesthetic form of journalism, and there are theatre companies across the world totally dedicated to documentary theatre.

But the play *Bhopal* is an imagined play based on a historical event. I created an imagined, rather than a documentary, play to dig deeper into the social and political angles, and examine the politics and power-relationships that caused the disaster rather than the disaster as the outcome.

RAHUL: As Picasso’s proverb goes:

“art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.”

And thus, in *Bhopal* the truth behind the social and political conflicts was extracted through the personal lives of play’s characters.

To the question of, role of political theatre in social discourse and its relationship to journalism ... Political theatre is decidedly aimed at social change and there is no end-point; need for change is an ongoing thing. There is an unbreakable dependence between political theatre and change, in its alignment with social justice and struggles against powers that deny human beings their dignities. Political theatre is primarily concerned with power – how people struggle against oppressive powers. Theatre is a site of subversion, where the struggle for human dignity and justice is staged.

Now, about the relationship to journalism – journalists are best equipped with the knowledge of reporting political events. And I would put theatre reviewers/critiques in this category. But ironically, more often than not, these critiques make a distinction between a political theatre and apolitical drama, favoring individual stories full of me, me and me rather than stories of power-struggle. Journalists have to truly treat political theatre as an aesthetic form.

ROHAN: This is really the question, isn’t it? I think political theatre is more important than ever, and I wish we had more of it happening. Theatre, as a medium, is particularly well equipped to combat the rampant misinformation and shoddy journalism that characterizes the current moment. Given the liveness and proximity of theatre, that is, you’re physically in the room with the storytellers, it’s much harder to get away with things mainstream media does.

The audience also has a chance to respond in the moment and question the version of events and viewpoints presented by theatre, which is certainly a more empowering position than the one-sided relationship we have with our TV, phone, or computer screens.

There’s a reason documentary theatre performances are incredibly well researched and concerned with ethics in a way that Facebook or Fox are just not.

ROHAN: Agit prop isn’t really the flavour of our times anymore, so a Living Theatre-style performance would likely fall flat and feel bizarre.

I think documentary theatre appeals to audiences because of its attention to detail and its casting of audiences as active witnesses to the event being depicted. In that sense, the conversation is less about agitating the masses and more about implicating them in the injustices of today, and advocating for a change in consciousness.

LK: **And yet, where is the momentum for activist-theatre in Canada? We can definitely look to austerity measures that have impacted everything from public arts funding and artist grants, to skyrocketing rental fees, to a lack of appeal or accessibility of theatre to the working class—but that didn’t stop activists from these earlier mentioned projects. Why do you think that is?**

RAHUL: Conformity! That simply means they do not understand, and therefore respect the power of theatre.

ROHAN: Continuing from my previous thought, it feels like activist theatre has evolved into a more subdued, intellectualized exercise. Political theatre is happening on our stages and in our communities, but its aesthetic has changed. Of course funding is a part of this because arts organizations are ultimately beholden to public funding bodies, corporations, and wealthy individual donors – none of whom are particularly interested in supporting radically disruptive works.

But I also think the public isn’t looking to theatre for its activism. Activism, on the other hand, has become increasingly theatrical. Activists know exactly what to do to get the public’s attention, how to make things go viral and appear on every single screen in the country, how to build and control a narrative. It’s interesting to see this shift happen.

As evidenced by the widespread protests across North America this summer, activism hasn’t gone away. Song, dance, and powerful performances, led by Black and Indigenous activists, have been an integral part of these protests. This activist theatre might not be staged in traditional theatre spaces or performed by ‘theatre artists’ as such, but it is happening where it matters the most – in our streets.

∞

The Sparkplug

The Sparkplug is a catalyst for difficult conversations, going where fast headlines don’t. Creative and artistic expression has the power to humanize political debates that are often abstract or driven by sensational media. The Sparkplug engages with the deeper questions of human dignity and struggle against the social orders that repress our most volatile possibilities.

Irregular, published whenever.

Access all issues: greenviolin.info/sparkplug.

The Sparkplug is an off-shoot of The Green Violin:

The Green Violin is a slow-burning, independent publishing project for the free distribution literary paraphernalia. The Green Violin is inspired by the creativity of resistance, courage and perseverance that is expressed by the human spirit in the face of all forms of oppression. This deep human connection, made possible through the dignity of literature and art, is one means to a life-long, critical disturbance of the unnatural order.

Molotovs are fashion statements!

Discover more: greenviolin.info