

One of the saddest photographs in *Exposure: Portrait of a Corporate Crime* is of three preserved fetuses displayed on a Bhopal rooftop. These fetuses were aborted by women who were exposed to the poisonous gases that leaked out of the Union Carbide factory in 1984. One of the fetuses looks quite developed, like a newborn baby fast asleep in a big glass jar. If you removed the fetuses from this rooftop, you would get an unimpeded view of the Bhopal skyline—sparkling white rooftops, trees, the slim towers of the Jama Masjid. Instead, you are left to wonder where the mothers are if they are alive at all, and what these babies would be doing, as 18-year-olds, today. This, Raghu Rai's latest project—a photographic study of the victims of Bhopal—is also his most powerful.

Late on the night of 2nd December 1984, around 40 tonnes of dangerous gases, including the lethal methyl isocyanate (MIC), escaped from Union Carbide India Limited's pesticide factory in Bhopal. Estimates of casualties vary significantly across sources, but by all accounts this was the world's worst industrial disaster ever. Independent investigative organisations put the immediate death toll at around 4,000 and the continuing death toll anywhere between 15,000 and 20,000. Over 150,000 people suffer from ailments directly related to exposure from the gas—respiratory problems, gynaecological problems, cancer, and stunted growth.

The immediate trigger (if there was one) has not been ascertained. Union Carbide's official report on the tragedy, *The Browning Report*, states unconvincingly but unambiguously that the leak occurred because a "disgruntled plant employee, apparently bent on spoiling a batch of methyl isocyanate, added water to a storage tank." This theory has few takers, and is left undefended even in the *Report* itself. Elsewhere, it has been widely reported that several counts of negligence also played a role. These include air-conditioning failures, overdue repairs, and most overarching—poor engineering decisions. According to Edward Munoz, a former Managing Director of Union Carbide India, it is fundamentally unsafe to store any MIC, however well-maintained the facilities may be. At the time of the disaster, the Bhopal tanks were storing 10,000 tonnes of MIC. This was around five times the immediate market demand in India, but was being maintained to establish monopoly power (with the cooperation of the Government of Madhya Pradesh) over the following decade. Corpwatch India, an independent monitoring organisation, describes the leakage as "environmental racism". But that is not necessarily the case—Munoz says that, though it is "crazy" to do so, larger amounts of MIC are stored in similar facilities by Union Carbide in the US.

The more compelling argument for environmental racism lies in the post-leak handling. From Union Carbide's refusal to release details about the composition of the gas on the night of the accident to its subsequent flight from its environmental and human responsibilities; the surviving victims have repeatedly been dealt slaps on the face. The settlement offered by Union

Environmental racism

Exposure: Portrait of a Corporate Crime

By Raghu Rai, with an Introduction by Anil Sharma

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Bhopal Gas Tragedy: The Worst Industrial Disaster in Human History

By Suroopa Mukherjee, with photographs by Raghu Rai

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(available at www.tulikabooks.com)

KARNA BASU



Mehboob Bi has two daughters and two sons. Her husband was a fitter at the Union Carbide plant and was on duty on the night of 2-3 December, 1984. "Life for us changed after that night. My husband died after 15 long years of struggle. In the last days it was painful even to look at him. We had to sell our two-story house to pay off our creditors and move to this one-room shanty. We do not have the resources and strength to fight the legal battle for compensation."

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An aborted fetus when the tragedy struck



Burial of an unknown child



Hasan Ali, a survivor

Carbide and accepted by the Indian government was considerably lower than American standards, and there have been few attempts at environmental damage control (groundwater contamination levels in Bhopal are still extremely high). Equally to blame are the Government of India, for representing the victims with its characteristic inefficiency, and, according to Raghu Rai, the media. In a recent conversation, Rai lambasted the media for catering to trends instead of creating public awareness. He explicitly stated that while 9/11 was fashionable, Bhopal was not.

It is this niche, that of actively directing the public's attention (traditionally in the media's domain), that Raghu Rai's book has the potential to fill. *Exposure* was published as an accompaniment to two recent exhibitions of Rai's photographs, at the Centre for Photography as an Art Form in Mumbai and at the Art Heritage Gallery in Delhi. The book contains 56 photographs with an Introduction by the journalist Anil Sharma. The first 11 photographs are from 1984, shot by Rai in the days following the accident. The following 45 photographs are a part of his ongoing effort to document the long-term aftermath of the tragedy, undertaken in cooperation with Greenpeace India.

The pictures are devastating. It is evident, especially in the early images, that Rai does not flinch in the face of horror. In "Burial of an Unknown Child," an infant lies on the ground, half covered in mud and stones. His lips are ajar, as if in mid-sentence, and his eyelids are open, revealing what resemble a doll's glass eyes. He appears baffled by the commotion around him. A hand gently caresses his forehead. In "Man Carrying his Dead Wife," we see exactly that—a man walks down a deserted street with his wife slung over his right shoulder. The sun falls on her back, illuminating the patterns on her sari and her dangling bare feet. The Union Carbide factory serves as background. And in the wrinkled face of "Lone Survivor," we see the disillusionment and despair that is rife 17 years later, already setting in.

The recent photographs are less shocking but more demoralising. A sense of fatalism is in the air. There is image upon image of victims living in pain—Hasan Ali with his daughters' arms wrapped around him, the teenager Mohammad Rehan displaying the scars from his two heart surgeries, the widowed Mehboob Bi's daughter hiding in the shadows of their one-room shanty, the additional DG of Bhopal Police putting drops in his eyes, Pushpa staring at the ceiling from her hospital bed, "The Shrinking Girl" who keeps getting smaller—the list goes on and on. Raghu Rai said of the immediate aftermath: "The tragedy is so overpowering, you don't have time to think, search deeper." These days, he is working more methodically, and has already spent several hours document-

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ing victims at the Bhopal Memorial Hospital. On his experiences in the hospital, he said, "I couldn't believe that the tragedy was going on at this level. Those who died then were lucky."

Rai is extremely talented both with his camera and in the darkroom. Some of these black and-white photographs are aesthetically on par with his best work, and their impact is all the stronger for it. His street photographer's instinct brings out the tragedy in all its heterogeneity. Distinct faces live out the common tragedy in distinct ways. The aluminium cupboard on which Mehboob Bi's daughter leans is decorated with a small cutout of a topless Salman Khan. On the wall behind Mohammed Rehan is a poster illustrating the human digestive system. Hasan Ali's eyes are a shade less



Skulls discarded after research at the Hamidia Hospital, Bhopal. Medical experts believe that the methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas inhaled by the people of Bhopal may have affected the brain

panicked when his daughters' arms are wrapped around him than when he sits alone. The details are revealed best in Raghu Rai's own prints. It is a slight pity that the reproductions in the book are not as good—many photographs have been printed darker than the original, thus eliminating detail from the shadows.

Éxposure is an important humanist document. In the months following September 11, 2001, the *New York Times* carried photographs of every person who died in the terrorist attack. These photographs were accompanied by short paragraphs—a few lines about their families, their aspirations, and their quirks. In the summer of 1946, John Hersey traveled to Hiroshima to find out what a handful of the survivors of the previous year's nuclear attack actually went through on the days following 6th August 1945. His findings, published in the *New Yorker* and as a Penguin Modern Classic, read like intertwined nightmares. As in these above cases, Raghu Rai ends up with an account of a massive human tragedy that is beyond rhetoric, politics, legalities, and even science. His focus is on the victims, not the perpetrators. The photographs are not open to debate.

An altogether different question is whether such humanist documents can lead to action on behalf of the victims. Since Union Carbide and the Government of India seem to have wrapped things up quite neatly from a legal perspective, it is up to the citizenry of India and the United States to embarrass both the Indian government and Dow Chemicals (with which Union Carbide recently merged) into providing improved medical facilities, cleaning up the groundwater, and further compensating victims who have lost their sources of livelihood. Both India and the US have effective activist traditions. Awareness about the tragedy is a first step towards getting help for the victims.

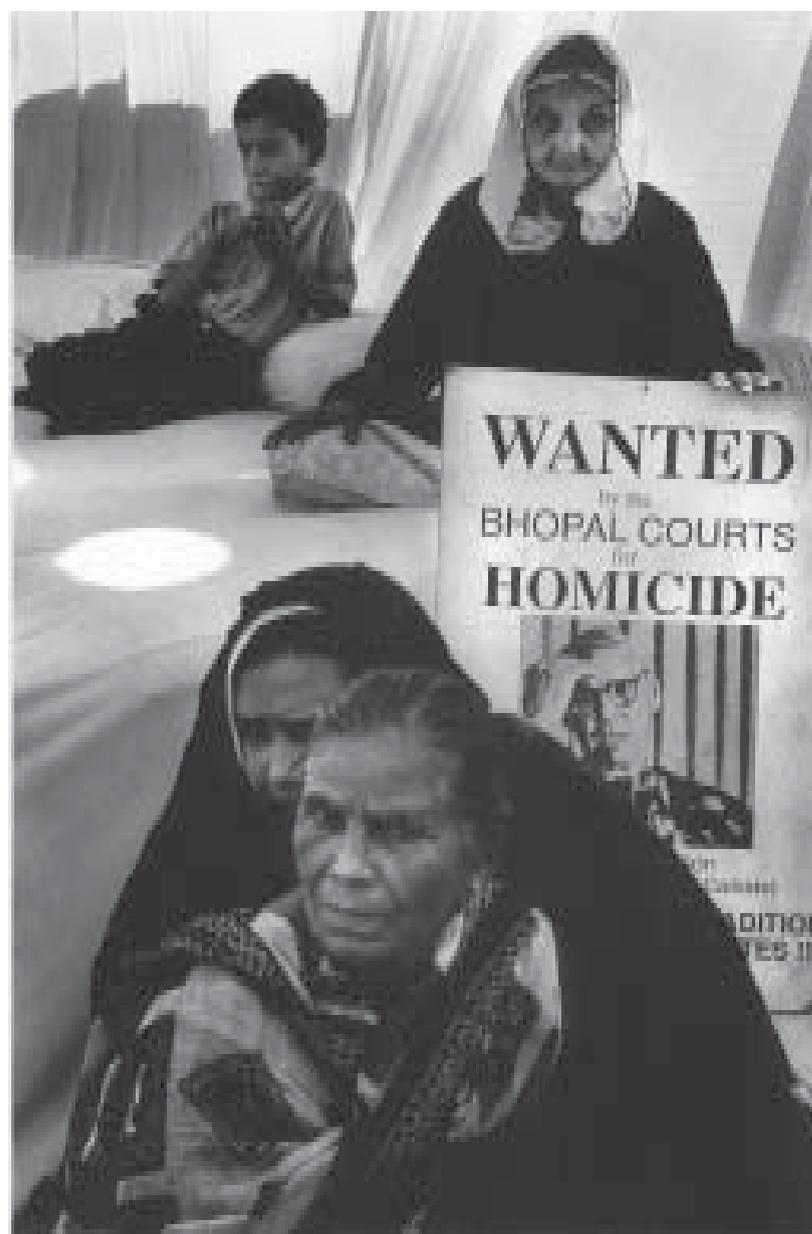
Suroopa Mukherjee's *Bhopal Gas Tragedy* is a slim volume described as "a

book for young people". It is targeted exclusively at teenagers, to whom Mukherjee tries to impart a grasp over the tragedy and a corresponding sense of outrage. The book is primarily a chronological account of events as they have unfolded over the years. This is interspersed with informative sections on Bhopal's history, industrial disasters in general, the evolution of pesticide technology, a background of the Union Carbide Corporation, and the like. The illustrations are Raghu Rai's, culled mostly from his *Éxposure* collection, but printed rather small.

Though a commendable enterprise, it is one that will most likely fail to engross its target audience. Mukherjee's chronological narrative should have been structured as a gripping, but true, *story*; instead it comes off as a rather convoluted amalgam of statistics, incidents, and the occasional unnecessary invective against corporations and lawyers. The tangential sections are in fact much more engaging—crisp and pointed, with nuggets of unexpected information. The narrative itself would be effective if it helped one relate to the victims before delving into details about the misdoings of Union Carbide and the Indian government. The book is still a useful reference document, but for a full impact on the young reader it needs to be accompanied by the material in *Éxposure*.

Photography—perhaps more than any of the other contemporary arts—frequently attempts social commentary. In making this attempt, many modern photographers fall into the traps of banality or excessive abstraction. They might make points that are better made through writing, thus weakening both the message and the aesthetic value of the photograph. In eschewing visual profundity for the sake of social commentary, one makes the camera itself irrelevant. Raghu Rai succeeds where many have failed. His social commentary is neither banal nor abstract.

However, Greenpeace seems to be



Survivors calling for the extradition of Warren Anderson, former Chief Executive of Union Carbide, from the US. Many protestors are women who lost their husbands and children

operating on the assumption that there is little readership for such a book. They have not distributed it in bookshops, and I had to travel to their Saket office to obtain my copy. The organisation has a history of supporting very legitimate concerns. Having initiated such an

exceptional project, their legacy should give them the confidence necessary to market the book widely, in the hope that it will contribute to public understanding about the plight of a people who are truly left without a voice.

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