

4 Environmental Rights and Justice

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Environmental Rights and Justice



Every person in every community has the right to health, and to a safe and healthy environment. Unfortunately, these rights are often not respected. Many people suffer from serious health problems caused by a scarcity of basic necessities and an excess of harmful substances. The most vulnerable people are those who have low status because of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, caste, poverty, or for other reasons. They usually suffer first, and worst.

The struggle to live in a healthy, safe, productive, and enjoyable environment by communities whose rights are not well respected by people in power is sometimes called the struggle for environmental justice.

There are many stories from around the world of communities suffering unjustly from environmental health disasters, just as many stories can be told of people organizing to protect and defend their right to health and environmental justice in the wake of these disasters. This chapter tells such a story.

The Bhopal Toxic Gas Disaster

On the night of December 3, 1984, in the city of Bhopal, India, a terrible disaster happened. A pesticide factory in a crowded and poor neighborhood of Bhopal leaked many tons of poison gas into the air. The warning system in the factory was turned off and other safety systems were not working, so the community heard no alarms of any kind.

One survivor, Aziza Sultan, remembers:

I woke in the night to the sound of my baby coughing badly. The room was filled with a white cloud. I heard people shouting 'Run! Run!' Then I started coughing with each breath as if I was breathing in fire.



Another survivor, Champa Devi Shukla, remembers:

People just got up and ran in whatever they were wearing, even if they were wearing nothing at all. They were only concerned with saving their lives and the lives of their loved ones, so they just ran.



It felt like somebody had filled my body with red chilies, my eyes had tears coming out, my nose was watering, I had froth in my mouth.

The poison gas killed many people that night. After 3 days 8,000 people had died. But this was not the end of the disaster. In fact, it was only the beginning.

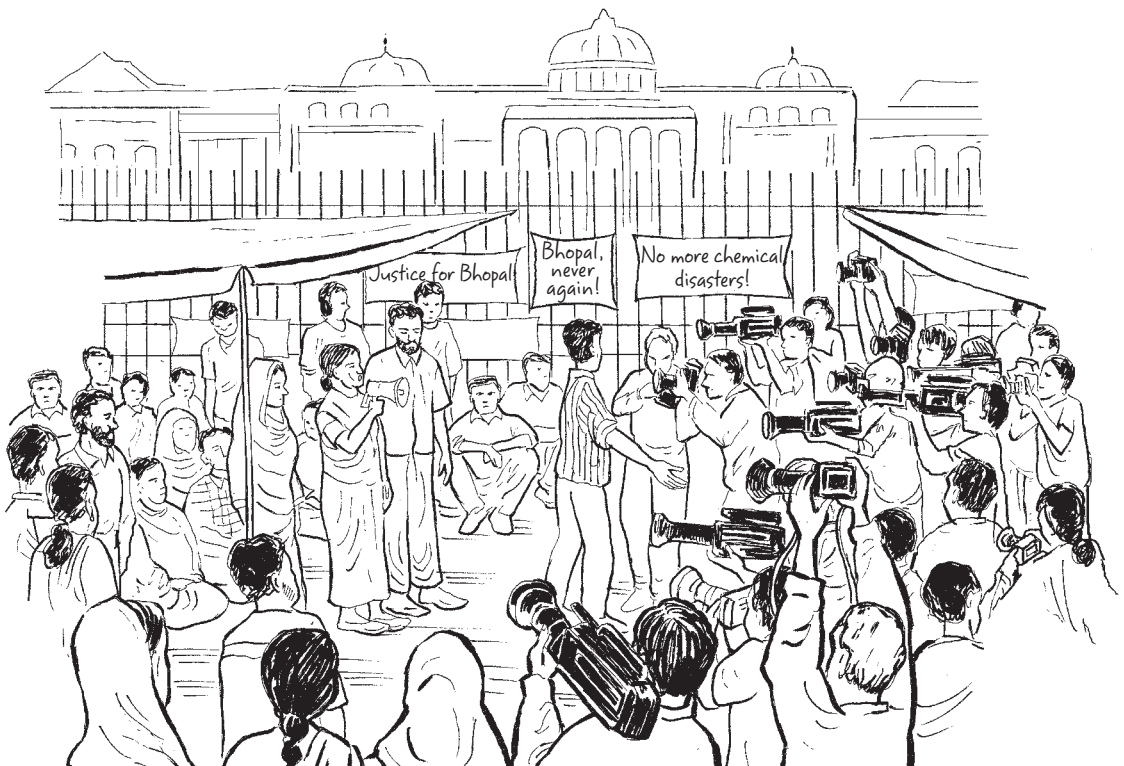
Over the next 20 years, more than 25,000 people died from the poison that remained in their bodies. Many more developed terrible illnesses, including pain and difficulty breathing, constant cough, fever, loss of feeling in their arms and legs, weakness, fear, depression, and **cancer**. Children and grandchildren of the survivors suffer from severe **birth defects**, including withered limbs, slow growth, and many different reproductive and nervous system problems. More than 150,000 people have been harmed by the poison gas released that night in Bhopal.

The Struggle for Rights and Justice

To this day, the site of the toxic gas leak has never been cleaned up and the abandoned factory remains as a deadly reminder of the disaster. Piles of toxic chemicals still lie in the open air, and the groundwater beneath the city is poisoned. Many people never received the medical treatment they needed for their health problems. For these reasons, the people of Bhopal do not think of the disaster as something that happened in the past only. They see it as an ongoing disaster they must face every day.

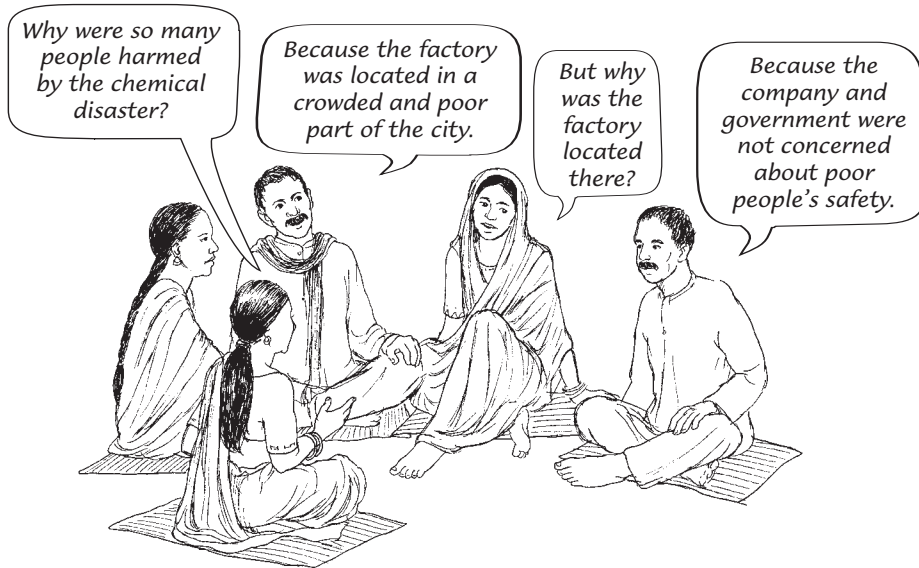
The pesticide factory was owned by a **multinational corporation** (a big company that works in many countries) called Union Carbide. Survivors of the disaster knew it was not right that their lives had been so damaged by the disaster. The people affected did not have money to treat their illnesses or to care for their family members who could no longer work. They wanted the company to take responsibility. But Union Carbide said the disaster was caused by a worker in the factory, and refused to take any responsibility even though it was their factory design that caused the disaster.

Like other people struggling for rights and justice, the people affected by the Bhopal disaster knew that their poverty not only made their problems worse — it was a large part of why the disaster happened in the first place.

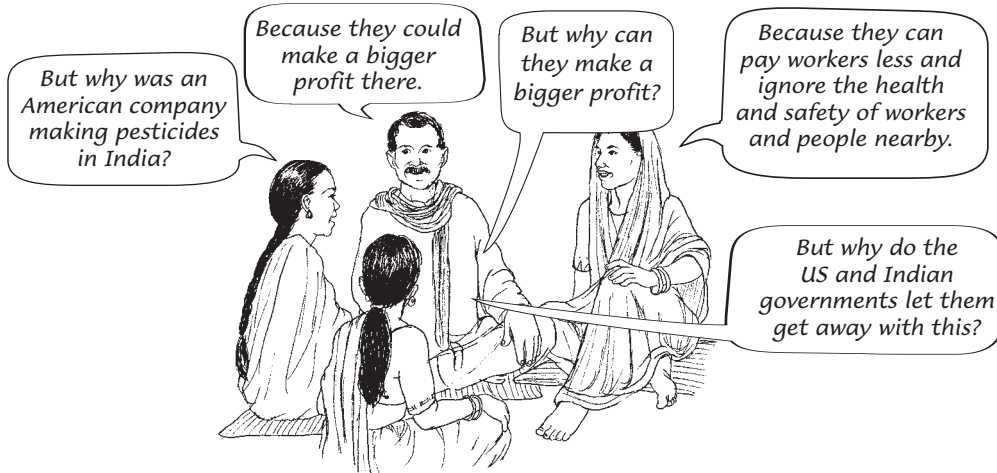


Why did the disaster happen?

The Bhopal disaster was, and is, a horrible event that should never have happened. But, as horrible as it was, it is not surprising. The “But why...?” activity can help understand the root causes of the Bhopal disaster.

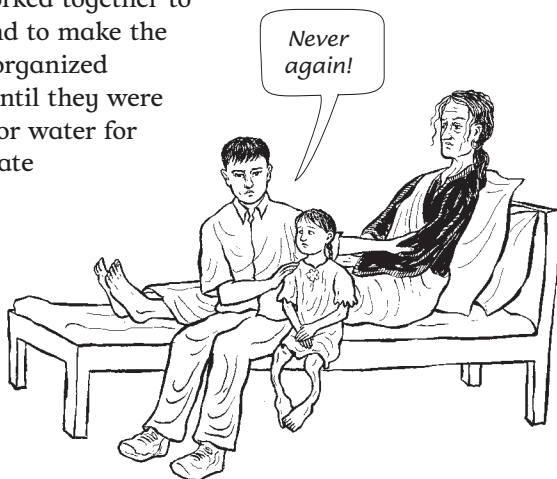


All over the world, corporations build their polluting factories, toxic dumps, and other dangerous industrial projects among people who are most oppressed by poverty and low status. In this way, poor countries and communities become dumping grounds for toxic industries, products, and pollution. This is why protecting environmental health is not just a matter of each of us changing the products we use and how we dispose of them, but of all of us challenging how the powerful abuse their power and how the most vulnerable among us are made to suffer damage to their health.



The international campaign for justice in Bhopal

Survivors of the Bhopal gas leak worked together to bring attention to their suffering and to make the company take responsibility. They organized hunger strikes, and refused to eat until they were heard. They marched with no food or water for 750 kilometers (466 miles) to the state capital. They also marched to the national capital to demand justice. Women set up a tent in front of the office of the state's chief minister. They camped out there for 3 months. Every day from dawn to dusk they chanted their demands.



Several years after the disaster, a court ordered Union Carbide to pay \$470 million to the Indian government. This was an important victory, but it was not enough. Most of that money never reached the survivors.

Soon after, Union Carbide was sold to another multinational corporation called Dow Chemical. Dow Chemical also refused to take responsibility or to help the affected people get treatment. Neither the government of India, where the disaster happened, nor the government of the United States, where both corporations are based, is willing to bring to justice the top corporate officials responsible for the disaster.

The survivors organized an international campaign to continue their struggle for justice. They built support among students, environmental groups, and human rights organizations. With support from people all over the world, the Bhopal survivors delivered their demands for justice to the headquarters of Union Carbide and Dow Chemical Company and the US and Indian governments. The survivors inspired others to go on hunger strikes and to take actions to bring attention to their suffering. And through it all, they have supported their families, organized their own health care (see page 345), supported victims of other toxic disasters, and survived.

The rallying cry of the campaign for justice in Bhopal is "Bhopal, never again!" Their goal is to prevent similar environmental disasters in the future. By making their struggle international, they have taught people around the world important lessons about the long-term effects of toxic exposure. The Bhopal survivors have shown industrial accidents can happen at any time, and that the poor are always more affected by them than anyone else. Their struggle for rights and justice has become a model for community organizers everywhere.

How Toxic Substances Get into our Bodies



**Eating and drinking
(ingestion)**



**Breathing
(inhalation)**



**Through the skin
(absorption)**

The longer someone is exposed to (in direct contact with) a toxic chemical, the more harm it can cause. In Bhopal, 500,000 people were exposed all at once by breathing the gas and getting it on their skin. This was the immediate disaster. Because the chemical disaster was not cleaned up and the chemicals spread widely throughout the areas around the factory, the poison got into the soil and the groundwater beneath the city. Now, many years later, people are drinking water with the poison in it. This is part of the ongoing disaster.

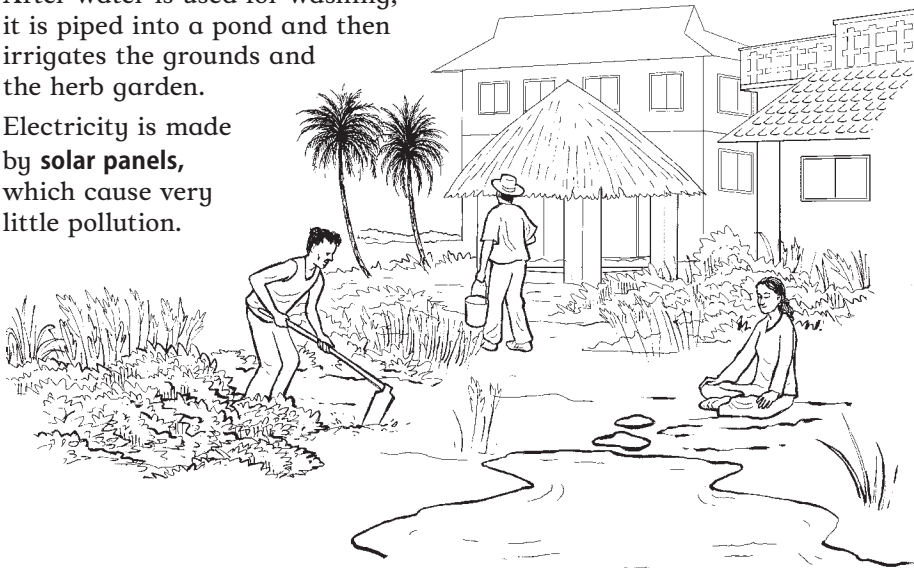
Whether in a large-scale toxic exposure such as the one in Bhopal or a simple exposure to toxics in paints, solvents, or other ordinary products, the first thing to do is to get away from the chemicals, or get them away from you, so that the exposure does not last. After that, work to prevent future exposures. (For more about health problems from toxic chemicals, see Chapter 16.)

A health clinic designed to protect the environment

People in Bhopal are fighting for environmental justice. At the same time, they are working to heal from the disaster. Survivors and other volunteers started the Sambhavna Clinic to provide health care to the whole community, regardless of ability to pay, or religious or caste differences. *Sambhavna* means “possibility” in the Sanskrit and Hindi languages.

The Sambhavna Clinic is a model of environmental health. It was built and operates as safely and sustainably as possible. For example:

- Only hot water and soap are used to clean the clinic, to make sure that no one is harmed by toxic cleaning products.
- Clinic workers started a garden to grow plant medicines. No chemicals are used in the garden. People treated at the clinic work in the garden and collect their own herbs for treatment.
- When new clinic buildings are needed, only nontoxic building materials are used. The buildings use local materials, and are designed to allow natural light and air to pass through.
- Rainwater is collected from tiled roofs during the wet season and stored in underground tanks, providing water for the dry season.
- After water is used for washing, it is piped into a pond and then irrigates the grounds and the herb garden.
- Electricity is made by **solar panels**, which cause very little pollution.



The Sambhavna Clinic shows how achieving health for all means not only treating the sick, but preventing illness in the first place. Their example of reducing harm from toxics can be followed in schools, businesses, government offices, and our homes. But even if we change our homes and institutions to make them healthier and more sustainable, all of us, especially the most vulnerable, are still at risk, as long as industries continue to produce and use toxic substances. (To learn more about the Sambhavna Clinic, see page 345.)

Working for change

By organizing their community to struggle for long-term health and well-being, the survivors of Bhopal have inspired people around the world to act for environmental rights and justice. These principles of organizing to reduce harm from toxic chemicals have proven useful:

- **Avoid toxics in daily life.** Use nontoxic chemicals for cleaning at home, in community institutions, or at the workplace (see pages 372 to 374). Do not use chemical pesticides or fertilizers in the garden, eat food grown without chemicals, and wash fruits and vegetables carefully before eating (see Chapter 14). Because we are likely to be exposed to toxics in our communities, we must pressure governments to stop allowing corporations to expose people, especially the most vulnerable.
- **Organize to prevent pollution.** Use different actions to prevent toxic disasters, including hunger strikes, sit-ins, and marches, as well as popular theater, the media, the internet, and other communication methods to educate people. If a factory is polluting, look for other ways that workers can earn their livelihood, because all people need jobs and income.
- **Force companies to clean up.** Although this is very hard to achieve, demanding that a corporation clean up its toxic mess is an important part of every struggle for environmental rights. People agree, even if corporations do not, that corporations must take responsibility to prevent harm and to repair any damage they cause. When people force corporations to pay for damage, the corporations are more likely to improve safety in the future.
- **Pressure governments for better safety standards.** Unfortunately, most governments protect corporate profits more than they protect people. This promotes environmental injustice and leads to disasters when the companies see safety as an avoidable cost, not a responsibility. Governments must change their priorities to protect all people, especially the most vulnerable.
- **Change the way industry makes things.** The Union Carbide factory in Bhopal made pesticides to control crop pests. But there are better ways to control pests than using these chemicals. In fact, there are less harmful and more sustainable ways to do just about everything. Why is it that we are allowed to be poisoned by industry, but not allowed to decide how things should be made?

If our governments protected us and our environment the way I protect my family, we would all be healthier.



Acceptable risk? For whom?

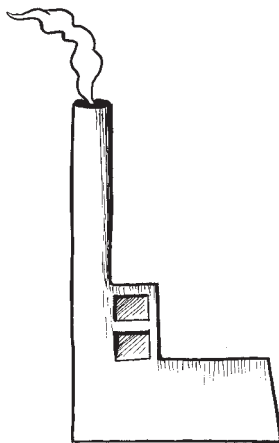
Industries and governments often justify the risk of environmental damage, even disasters such as the one at Bhopal, by saying that a certain amount of risk is acceptable as “the cost of development.” This usually means that the most vulnerable of us are sacrificed in order for business to continue making profits as usual. For most of us, that is not acceptable. The pursuit of profit is no justification for causing so much harm and violating people’s human rights to health and a healthy environment.

If the Union Carbide company or the Indian government had been guided by the precautionary principle (see page 32), perhaps the Bhopal toxic gas disaster would not have happened.

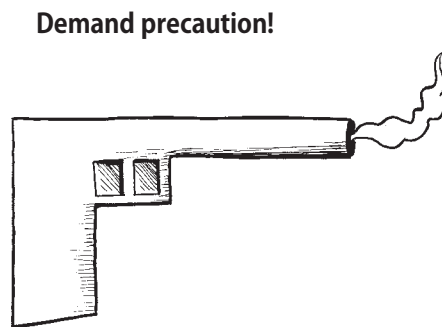
Demanding precaution

Safety measures can reduce harm. But even when safety measures are taken, there is always some risk in industrial factories. If risks cannot be avoided, then at least they should be shared equally and not affect only the poorest people and communities.

In the long term, to be as safe as possible, industries must be organized in a way that values safety and sustainability more than high profits. To achieve this, we should demand that corporations develop safer and more just ways of doing things, and that governments hold them accountable by making and enforcing laws that protect health and the environment. One way to promote environmental justice for all is to demand that our leaders and those in power make decisions guided by the precautionary principle.



A smoking factory...



...can be turned into a smoking gun.