

“We are flames not flowers”: a gendered reading of the social movement for justice in Bhopal

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We are not dealing with a silent content that has remained implicit, that has been said and yet not said, and which constitutes beneath manifest statements a sort of sub-discourse that is more fundamental, and which is now emerging at last into the light of day.

- Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969.

We are women of Bhopal we are flames not flowers
We will not wilt before your corporate power
With our brooms in hand we're gonna sweep you away
For we'll fight for justice till our dyin' day

- Terry Allan (Copyright, 2003)

Abstract

*This essay is in continuation of the article that Eurig Scandrett and I wrote for the previous issue of **Interface** (Scandrett and Mukherjee 2011). It looks at gender as one of the abstractions that arises from the material condition of the industrial disaster in Bhopal that happened on 3 December 1984, which is often compared to Hiroshima, in the nature of its destruction. Bhopal has also witnessed a grassroots movement, remarkable in its tenacity and its well-defined battle-line against the monolithic power of the State and the Corporation. The survivors' organisations present two interrelated profiles for the movement. One is local and includes a large section of women, who are illiterate and bound by patriarchy. The other is the international face of the movement.*

This essay looks at the role played by women in the movement. At the same time, oral history methodology highlights the vision of a gender sensitive world, which is alien to the material conditions these women live in. While academically we can bring in feminist readings, they do not serve the purpose of relating to women's consciousness and how they visualize their own emancipation. This essay looks at gender as a problematic category that needs redefinition.

Introduction

This essay is a companion piece to the article "Globalisation and Abstraction in the Bhopal Survivor's Movement" (Scandrett and Mukherjee 2011). Both the articles draw upon the research findings of the Bhopal Survivors' Movement Study Group, which undertook an ethnographic study of the social movement in Bhopal.¹ The fight for justice in Bhopal that began the morning after the gas leak on 3 December 1984, and continues to this day, has been described as one of the longest lasting social movements in the world.

In the previous article we looked at an important aspect of social movements, namely the nature of abstractions that emerge from what Raymond Williams has described as the "militant particularism" of most social movements.² We saw in the social movement in Bhopal a divergence in the form of abstractions that arose from different facets of the movement. We argued that "divergent praxis" constituted the "contrasting processes of abstraction" that had to be seen in relation "to the political opportunities afforded by the global structuring of capital" (Scandrett and Mukherjee 2011: 198). Drawing upon Stephen Zavetowski's analysis of the international mobilization of the Bhopal justice campaign, we were able to draw a parallel between the global anti-toxics movement and the global reach of the chemical industry (Zavetowski 2009: 402). This enabled us to explore the dialectical relationship between social movements and material conditions that gave the movement its direction and shape. In the case of Bhopal, we identified three such abstractions that played a crucial role in defining the nature of the struggle for justice: they were environmental justice, class conflict and gender.

Environmental justice brought to the forefront the international face of the social movement in Bhopal. Both symbolically and materially the focal point of the disaster was its location – Bhopal, the state capital of Madhya Pradesh, India. At the same time, a historical timeline showed that the movement, which had sustained itself for over two and a half decades, was witness to the changing political reality brought on by globalisation. Therefore, from the 1990s onwards changing material conditions required a change in the direction of the social movement. The International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB) became the nodal body, which formed a coalition of survivor's organisations, solidarity groups and campaigners across the world. ICJB took up issues of environmental degradation, corporate negligence and human rights violation. It garnered support from international agencies like Greenpeace and Amnesty, so that

¹ The Bhopal Survivor's Movement Study Group was headed by Eurig Scandrett from Queen Margaret University (QMU), UK, with Suroopa Mukherjee as consultant from Delhi University, and Dharmesh Shah and Tarunima Sen as Research Assistants. It was a yearlong project (August 2007 to September 2008) that looked at the *Ethnography of the Social Movement in Bhopal*. We conducted interviews with individuals who belonged to different survivor groups actively participating in the resistance movement in Bhopal. The interviews were recorded on digital video and audiotape and it followed the format and norms laid down by oral history methodology.

² For a fuller understanding of the concept see Harvey (1995).

Bhopal became a matter of global concern.³ As the Hiroshima of industrial disaster, it was felt that the lessons of Bhopal had to be widely learnt. Therefore, the rallying cry of the worldwide movement for justice against corporate crime was "No More Bhopals."

The class conflict highlighted the abject poverty of the survivor community and the indifference of the urban middle class. It was a reminder of how the poor, who lived in the slums adjacent to the factory, became the expendable population that paid the price for development. Grassroots organisations based in Bhopal, like Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (BGPMUS, Women Workers Union), Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationary Karamchari Sang (BGPMKS, Stationary Workers Union), and Gas Peedit Nirashrit Pension Bhogi Sangarsh Morcha (BGNPBSM, Destitute Pensioners Front) took up people's cause and locked horns with state and central governments over crucial issues of employment, enhanced compensation money, and proper medical treatment. A lot of importance was given to the grassroots strength of the groups, and their capacity to mobilise the community to participate in joint action programmes. In an important sense the futuristic vision of "No More Bhopals" was drawn from an empirical reality-check of what can best be described as the "continuing Bhopal."

It was with the third category of abstraction, relating to gender, that the Study Group came up with problems of theorising based on material conditions. Any attempt on our part to interpret the interviews we conducted with women survivors from a strictly feminist point of view met with several roadblocks. In the feedback forms that the Study Group shared with each other, gender became an elusive term, and Scandrett and Mukherjee found themselves disagreeing on how to approach gender as an important tool for research purposes. Scandrett's contention was that gender did not become an important abstraction emerging from the militant particularism of the movement; this happened despite the large scale participation of women in the movement, and the increasing use of gendered critique to analyse social movements by activists and feminist commentators.

Mukherjee's approach was based on the work she had done on oral history, which took her through the maze of personal and collective narratives, memories and testimonial gatherings that became an important part of recording people's history in their own voices. In her book *Surviving Bhopal* (2010) she had prioritised women's voices in those areas where they played a major role in defining the social ramifications of an industrial disaster. She was able to show how the voices gained significance in the larger political context of the virtual erasure of the category of women survivors in official documents. The next step was to reconstruct the history of the movement by retrieving women's voices from political oblivion. In the process, she was able to use

³ Bhopal.net will provide a more detailed account of the survivor groups in Bhopal. To get a more analytical study of the groups and their power politics see Bhopal Survivor's Movement Study (2010).

gender in conjunction with oral history, so that ideological subject position and fieldwork methodology found a common meeting ground. She studied the impacted community, not only as a case study of disasters in general, but in terms of what she hopes to explain further in this article, as unmediated narratology.⁴

In this essay we pick up the trail of the argument from where we had left it in the previous article. Once again, following the trajectory of the movement through the historical timeline showed that gender was not a static concept. It critiqued the model of development that denied the long-term effect of the gas on the woman's body. In an important sense, gender brought back the world's attention to the gruesome reality that the second generation, born to gas affected parents, had disabling congenital defects. Thus, woman embodied both in bodily forms and in the history of such accidents the gross injustice that was meted out to people by monolithic systems of power. In this case, people were pitted against the combined power of the state in collusion with multinational corporations. The presence of women in agitational modes of action and resistance became increasingly important for drawing attention to the continuing aftermath of the gas leak.

This essay will also deal with the important question of how ethnographic research used the interview method to create levels of awareness about knowledge formation within a social movement. Since an average gas survivor, male and female, was illiterate, it made oral history an important research tool. Scientific discourses generated by a technological disaster had to come face to face with people's knowledge. Many of the women we spoke to used narratives of pain, loss and intense suffering to reclaim their identity as women who carried the chemical burden in their ravaged bodies. Their stance was self-reflexive at the emotive level, and therefore it inspired the survivors to carry on fighting for their rights.

It is this gendered reading of the Bhopal social movement that will be taken up for analysis in the rest of the essay. We will try to show how the very process of "telling" their stories became enabling for the Bhopali women. Therefore, knowledge making was not about literacy or the written discourse. People's knowledge was seen as empowering, by simply creating non-textual meaning that found expression in messages printed on banners, badges, headbands and on T-shirts, which could easily be understood by the lay person. The idea was to convey important facts and figures both diagrammatically and in terms of easily grasped information in bullet form. A premium was given to the weekly meetings held by the survivor groups, where issues were discussed and information was disseminated by members who held official positions in the

⁴ We experimented with the idea of publishing the interviews directly without bringing in theoretical analysis. The idea was to create a framework by using a historical timeline, representative voices and a thematic arrangement of issues that arose from contingent factors. This, we felt, would give an idea of how unmediated people's perspective is a significant research method offered by oral history. See Bhopal Survivors' Movement Study (2010).

organisation. All members were given an equal chance to ask questions and raise doubts. In an important sense this kind of outreach programme fitted well into the oral history method of interviews that the Study Group was conducting. The grassroots workers too spoke to the community, and replied to queries on matters that needed clarification. A multilayered exchange of information and innovative ideas, fed into the learning process within social movement groups.

Since theorising was inherent in the practice itself, it made the gender-abstraction invisible and yet well entrenched in the material conditions. It is therefore imperative that ethnographic research takes on the onerous task of drawing attention to the kind of knowledge making that brings in the people's perspective. At the same time, oral history uses time-tested methods to make the spoken word as effective as possible. Not only does the spoken word convey the true meaning of struggle and resistance, it also becomes the means for countering official denial and misrepresentation. The focus is on narrative forms, both oral and written, and how they become analytical tools that are part of the protest action.

Gender abstractions and their invisibility in social movements

In this section we will take up the rather intriguing question of the "invisibility" and yet rootedness of gender based abstractions in the material conditions of a post-trauma experience. Why was the women's question neglected in both the scientific and activist discourses that emerged from the Bhopal movement? Right from the beginning, doing research in Bhopal was fraught with danger and uncertainties, given the politically surcharged atmosphere. Also the magnitude of the disaster and its morbidity graph meant that government had to step in to take charge of the crisis situation. An entire bureaucratic setup was put in place, so that relief and rehabilitation schemes became operative with immediate effect.⁵ Therefore, agitational methods used by different survivor groups got discredited for being populist and detrimental for maintaining law-and-order. Needless to say, State repression started almost simultaneously with the implementation of welfare measures.

However, this fire fighting approach on the part of the government continued long after the immediate crisis was over. As a result, long-term rehabilitation, which was the need of the hour, was neglected. Gender surfaced time and again as an important concept, which proved that an industrial disaster adversely affected all those who were already marginalised. It is interesting to observe that

⁵ The Ministry of Bhopal Gas Relief and Rehabilitation was set up in Bhopal. It was placed directly under the Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilisers (MOCF), at the central government, with a special Bhopal cell headed by a Director at the joint secretary level, who reported to the Ministry of Chemicals. A Group of Ministers (GOM) was also formed to take policy decisions and oversee the implementation of schemes. Given the fact that nothing was done properly, despite the presence of a powerful body like the GOM, survivor groups put pressure on the government to set up an empowered commission with the power to enforce decisions. Despite the assurance given by the PM (Manmohan Singh) about looking into the matter, the demand has been set aside on flimsy grounds.

women preferred agitational methods for issue-based protests, largely because it drew attention to the particular nature of their plight. At the same time, many of them were less eager to talk of gender as a separate category, simply because they did not believe that a woman's voice will be heard, unless and until it is embedded in a masculine debate. So any attempt on the interviewer's part, to draw attention to feminist discourse by asking certain targeted questions, did not cut much ice with them.

Yet, a closer look at these narratives will show that they are descriptive and anecdotal rather than theoretically loaded. This again ties up with problems faced by the Bhopali women, which prevented them from seeing the role they played in the survivors' organisation as emancipatory. The marginal position of women in the family and in the workplace got replicated in the grassroots organisation. This in turn was tied up with material conditions that inevitably follow a disaster. So an attempt on the part of the impacted community to overcome adversary situations, and begin the slow process of recovering from trauma was met with any number of hurdles and difficulties. Here again, women faced discriminations based on their secondary position in the patriarchal family. Thus, women's narratives spoke about the humiliation they had to face in compensation claims office and in hospitals; they also spoke about indifferent doctors, loud mouthed politicians, predatory touts and middlemen.

The contradictory manner in which gender worked as a conceptual research tool, becomes evident when we look at the demands that were made by survivor groups. No doubt most organisations strategically brought in women's issues in the memorandum they submitted to the government. The government, in turn was eager to appear just in the eyes of the people. So they too made promises to mete out justice for those who had lost everything that night. However, women continued to feel neglected, for demands were made with electoral politics in mind, and though attempts were made to make the demands gender sensitive, in real terms there was no attempt to highlight women's experience of neglect and marginalization. So gender as abstraction failed to connect to a lived reality.

An ethnographic study of a disaster has to relate abstractions to the oral narrative of pain and suffering. Thus, the vocabulary of protest is meant to interpolate abstraction, experience, and narration that is both individual and collective. Only then can we talk about a social movement and the distinct consciousness it helps to create. In this case, there was no doubt that women had entered the field to fight for their rights as women, but none of the women we interviewed saw their grassroots battle as part of any such consciousness. If anything, a woman's strength was viewed as something acquired by compulsion and not choice. No doubt, they spoke with pride about the change in the direction of their lives, and no one was willing to give up on the battle for justice. But this change in consciousness and material conditions had come to them at a heavy price. Therefore, oral history narratives were replete with bruised memories rather than memories that celebrated women's emancipation.

In the case of an industrial disaster, which affects a huge population, rehabilitation schemes identify the family as a basic unit for doling out relief. The members of the family are then classified under different headings. Not surprising that women's position in the family remained secondary, in almost all official documents. Mukherjee has done a fuller analysis of this in *Surviving Bhopal* where she is able to show how prevailing stereotypes get even more ingrained in times of crisis (Mukherjee, 2010: 89).

To begin with, women were cited as the best unit in the family to get a job and other welfare benefits. This was done on the basis that women are traditionally known to be passive, obedient and self sacrificing. Sewing centers were set up to generate employment for gas-affected women, but none of the schemes were sensitive to women's needs. As a result, the added responsibility only made women more dependent on levels of authority. At the same time, they were asked to take on the role of a sole bread-earner at the helm of the family, a role which is traditionally denied to them. Thus, gender issues got diffused in mainstream discourses, rendering them invisible. What was seen as an absence of gender sensitive abstractions was in actual terms an inability to keep women's issues separate from notions of rehabilitation/restitution, which carried its own hegemonic masculine interpretation. As a result, women got disengaged from feminist notions of self-help and empowerment. Even after a few years, when needs based relief measures gave way to the more radically oriented rights-based rehabilitation, gender remained in the background. Any attempts to rewrite the history of disasters from the grassroots perspective, carried the same limitations. Women were not viewed as history makers or as instruments of change.

Identifying research methods conducive for studying gender specific issues

One of the important research methods the Study Group followed was to identify gender specific issues, and then framing them into key-questions, which were asked during the interview sessions. However, structured question-answers often gave way to semi-structured ones, given the contingent factors and the inherent difficulty that women faced in answering questions that were alien to their material conditions. Since women continued to participate in the social movement in large numbers, we began focusing on narratives of "experience" that became an important aspect of oral history practice. We found a lot of data in the form of newspaper cuttings, newsletters, pamphlets, press releases and photographs that was being scrupulously collated in indigenous archives by different survivor groups. In an important sense, the narratives of experience that we gathered through interviews ceased to be just another way of recounting personal stories; instead, it became valuable data for understanding why activism and archiving often go together.

We used some of the photographs and newspaper items as codes to trigger the memory of the person interviewed. Our attempt was to take cognizance of the

material conditions that shaped individual and collective memory, so that women often shared memories that belonged collectively to a particular phase of the disaster. We also encouraged them to remember dates and other factual details, but most often subjective memories of death and loss replaced the more objective mode of recalling events that was public in nature. The most vivid memories were that of the closing down of the Silai (stitching and embroidery) centers, which had given women their first employment opportunity. Each anniversary was marked on the calendar and became the timeline that measured the complete failure of the government to mete out justice to its own people. It is interesting to observe how these memories, which were dictated by a sense of personal loss, could not really accommodate gender abstractions. The only way the women's question was brought into the narratives was through external-aids; the researcher used codes that drew attention to women-oriented issues, without allowing them to get drowned by other mainstream discourses. Yet this was not necessarily how Bhopali women analysed their own problems. Their material conditions did not allow them to prioritise their own plight, over and above that of the family. It resulted in a serious disjunction between memories and the methodological framework within which oral history researched gender.

Sometimes, women did bring in their own objective way of remembering. Thus, many of them spoke at length about their loyalty to organisations that had given them their identity and space for self-development. If our questions indicated the patriarchal nature of these organisations, women argued in favour of men as movement intellectuals, given their own lack of education. Any form of personal enmity or breakdown of relationships was mentioned with a lot of emotional intensity. The Study Group was soon to realise that differences were personal rather than ideological. Therefore, any attempt on our part to bring in western notions of feminism proved to be futile. Most of the women we interviewed had no problems in being under the tutelage of male leaders. So they refused to question their predicament in exclusively gendered terms. Feedback from our research assistants clearly indicated that fieldwork had to concentrate far more on material conditions and not on abstractions.

In *Surviving Bhopal* Mukherjee took into consideration the work done by Indian scholars with feminist leanings on important gender issues, such as women's lack of control over their bodies and the impact of environmental pollution on their lives (U. Ramaswamy et al. 2000 and V. Ramaswamy 2003). However, her contention was that there was virtually no feminist research done on industrial disasters. At the same time, it opened up a nascent area of research, which was pertinent given the global expansion of Multinational Corporations. The few references she found were looking at working conditions in modern factories; surprisingly, very little was written about the threat faced by those who lived in residential areas, in the vicinity of such toxic producing factories (Bannerjee 1991; Avasthi and Srivastava 2001; M. Bhattacharya 2004; Saksena 2004). In most cases of environmental pollution, its effect on women was seen as collateral damage.

However, the contentious issue of knowledge vs ignorance of the threat posed by polluting industries became an important part of knowledge building done by grassroots organisations. But awareness was a matter of hindsight. The Study Group was often surprised to see how far women had become aware of social issues that got linked to an industrial disaster and its aftermath. As pointed out earlier, abstractions that centred on environmental justice and class conflict were easily interpolated with their own experience of having to live in an area which was declared as one of the world's most toxic hotspot. Today the derelict factory has over 5000 tons of toxic waste, which was hurriedly put into sealed containers and still awaits permission for its disposal. The rest of the waste matter, following the breakdown of compound gases, had seeped into the water-table. People were compelled to consume contaminated water in the absence of regular water supply. The major issue that plagued the survivor groups was the all important question of who will do the clean up - government or the company? To date, this has remained a central debate in which women too have participated. Women saw this as a class conflict, which is inherent in the way rehabilitation was carried out. The class of survivors was seen as a burden on the exchequer; they became parasites that lived off the limited resources that a city could offer. Even as the death toll went on rising, and the nature of illness kept getting worse, the Bhopal survivors were seen as a roadblock to the forward march of society.

Mukherjee's contention is that listening to voices engaged in debates over issues that are a part of the agenda of a particular survivor group gives us a clear insight into how dissemination of knowledge becomes a collective exercise. Therefore, a premium is given to useful or relevant knowledge or perhaps information that pertains to the immediate issue at hand. Since we are looking at learning in terms of its utility, we can only talk of it in relation to its relevance. In the Indian context class determines the level and kind of education that are made available to the girl child. Most of the survivors were migrant labourers who had come to Bhopal from adjoining states, and were working in labour intensives areas on a daily wage basis. When they came in the path of the deadly gas, they lost their ability to do any work. As usual women were the worst hit. So any attempt to link people's movement with women's emancipation becomes a futile exercise. Women's narratives are replete with feelings of being ostracised; many were abandoned by their husbands and sons for they could hardly afford to pay the medical bills. Worse still was the exploitation by touts and moneylenders. Many narratives recount the feeling of being betrayed by journalists, doctors, lawyers, academics and politicians.

Wherever women have emerged as the main spokesperson for the group, it is done in a calculated way, so as to project women as the "face" of Bhopal. Needless to say, the media coverage that beams into middle-class homes is tailor-made to suit middle-class perception of women fighting in the streets. So long as these homespun images failed to destabilise a male dominated society, there was very little possibility of bringing gender centre-stage, into the very vortex of the conflict.

However, there was another important question that had to be asked by researchers working in the field. Did gender issues shape the ideological content of the resistance movement? Here there was slight disagreement in the Study Group. On a personal note Mukherjee felt that it did, albeit in an oblique and partial way. She felt that it helped to retrieve gender from a quagmire of orthodox beliefs and make it into a polemical issue. It became necessary for the Study Group to bring in the Indian context, where gender is much less an abstraction of women's rights and much more of a cultural site of contestation, where women are generally silenced. So the ideological premise of oral history, which allows for women to voice their concerns, broke through the wall of silence and retrieved some of the lost voices. In the case of the social movement in Bhopal, women were empowered by allowing them to enter a public domain and share their ideas of a toxic free world with fellow participants in the social movement. It was this transition from an enclosed domestic space to the streets and location of the protest action that gave women survivors a liberating sense of becoming "visible" to the world at large. Mukherjee argued for demarcating the Indian context, in which, however prolonged or brief was the foray into the public domain, returning back to a conservative home was never meant to be seen as a big problem. It was visibility, partial or otherwise, that made women and the attendant women's issues the rallying point of the struggle for justice.

In many of our interviews women spoke about their organisations as extended families. Women had very definitive roles to play within the organisation. They belonged to the rank and file, and their task was to address the basti (slums) people and keep them informed about organisational activities. Women had to attend weekly meetings, which kept them abreast of the larger movement and the nature of the demands that were being made to the higher echelons of power. Women were also encouraged to face the media. It was largely in this context that survivor groups began to concentrate on women related issues, and press for relief and restitution for widows, socially ostracized girls, and women giving birth to children with congenital defects. Environmental justice joined the fray by bringing in issues of poisoned mother's milk, while class conflict drew attention to the poverty stricken, gas affected families where women had become the sole bread earners. Gender became the mediating factor that tied all the issues under a common rubric that drew attention to the failure of justice in Bhopal.

A technological disaster by its very definition uses specialised, scientific knowledge that is far removed from the vocabulary of the survivors. However, the resistant movements used people's knowledge as an instrument of protest. An entirely homespun literature found expression in songs, slogans, and innovative use of signs, posters and banners. It is in these cultural sign systems that gender found its political ramifications. The very pervasiveness of the symbols and its meaning made it a powerful tool of resistance. In many of our interviews we were able to draw attention to evocative narratives of suffering, protesting, learning and gaining selfhood. In an important sense, the baseline of our research was empirical rather than theoretical, so abstractions remain embedded in a plethora of images and voices that in Foucault's terms (see the

epigram at the beginning of the article) is not merely the "silent content" but the "sub-discourse" beneath "manifest statements." (Foucault 1969: 75)

The process of identifying gender specific issues was largely governed by a very important aspect of oral history methodology. The interviewer was as much a part of the politics of engagement. As participant observer she/he was made to enter into a dialogue with the interviewee. The Study Group also felt the need to get away from the middle-class bind that saw research and activism as separate discourses. Activism was discredited on grounds that it could dilute and corrupt serious research. There was a lot of anxiety to keep them apart. We adopted an approach that was diametrically opposite to the one mentioned above.

In our previous paper Scandrett's contention was that feminist abstraction did not contribute to meaning-making within the movement. In this essay, we try to step aside from the main parameters that define feminism, by shifting attention to Foucault's sub-discourse, which becomes an embedded process of meaning-making, where the interviewer and interviewee are both seen as participating in an interactive and shared methodology of learning. In other words, the researcher too becomes involved with the conceptualising of the movement. So it was the researcher's task to bring in the abstractions and then analyze them through the question/answer method. Our research assistants soon discovered that taking the feminist position did not help in eliciting the kind of answers they were looking for. Yet, this did not prevent them from including gender as an important research tool.

It is here that the gap between theory and praxis became a defining quality of the research project itself. The vision of a gender sensitive world was evoked as a utopian model of a better world that could not be realized in the lives of people in any way. So reality was a far cry from what the vision endorsed. Taking part in the agitations and struggle for justice became the only way of freeing oneself from the cynicism of failure. The researcher was invited to participate in the campaign, in an act of solidarity with the cause and fellow protesters. Many of the interviews were actually conducted at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, at the very site of the protest action. This was clearly meant to remind us that Bhopal can repeat itself in our own backyard. We joined the movement, and as we heard the taped version of the narratives, we realized that we were listening to our own stories.

The interview process became the means for creating a database. The purpose was not only to record people's perspective, but to enable the researcher to formulate ideas on a shared basis. The questions asked and the answers given were to become the learning tools for both research and activism. So, this form of archiving was not just meant to facilitate academic research. Learning was seen as a mode of intervention, so that archiving forgotten data and retrieving it in tape recordings for future use, became an intrinsic part of knowledge building at the grassroots level. Oral history opened avenues for integrating knowledge and practice in a way that was enabling for both the interviewer and the interviewed.

Unmediated speaking voices

In this section we would like to draw attention to a few of the “unmediated speaking voices” and their narratives. The use of the term “unmediated” refers to an important aspect of the interview method. It suggests that the point of view is not dictated by an approach that is alien to the interviewee’s mind set. This is particularly true in the case of an industrial disaster, which has to work out a balance between an official approach and the experiential approach. Things get further complicated when research projects like the kind we were undertaking came with its own academic baggage. In the case of Bhopal, the balance was all the more difficult to maintain, since the experiential approach was dismissed by both State administration and academics as being too subjective and therefore, lacking in authenticity. At the same time, nobody trusted the official approach, for it was mired in different kinds of falsification and gross misrepresentation. So oral history methodology, which defines the researcher as participant-observer talks of balancing subjectivity with the need to be objective. In this context, the “unmediated” speaking voice becomes an important research tool.

Bhopal has always been a very sensitive issue; twenty six years down the line, we are still looking at a community which has neither got proper compensation nor justice. The objectivity that we are talking about is therefore mired in politics. Can the passage of time heal the wounds? Here again, oral history was a reminder that we are looking back at events with hindsight, so that memory “constructs” the events keeping in mind the “objective distance.” However, does this entail an analytical perspective?

Curiously enough, with the passage of time memories appear to be less selective and more speculative in nature. It is in this context that the “unmediated” voices become important. The Study Group was able to talk to people across the line from group leaders, to campaigners and rank and file workers. We tried our level best to elicit frank opinions on differences, conflict of interest and hostility between groups. We discovered that women were more than willing to speak freely about the nature of these differences. As the same time, when subjective opinions become the means for exploring polemical areas of conflict, we were compelled to bring in a larger objective picture of how social movements try to negotiate differences. Needless to say, this is how abstractions are arrived at in a discourse, and particularly in the case of Bhopal, they gain importance because we were looking at mass levels of human rights violation. Using the oral history background drawn from Mukherjee’s repertoire of narratives, we tried to account for the “invisibility” of gender abstraction, by showing how it is embedded in the material conditions of a social movement. The fact that women spoke from experience and not theoretical knowledge did not in any way take away from the serious intent and purpose of what our interviews revealed.

Here are some of the recorded voices; we have taken care to maintain the anonymity of interviewees on request. The quoted passages are drawn from much longer interviews, so it can at best give us a glimpse of issues that have been dealt with in a more expansive way. In most cases we will see how the

personal, oral "narrative" becomes a self-reflective medium which presents individual opinions without losing sight of the representative nature of the argument.

This voice talks of the role played by women in the setting up of survivor organisations (tape 17):

The women of Bhopal initiated the movement and I initiated the BGPMUS. It was registered in Indore and its reg. no. was 3480. We did not know what a union was or what it could do. When ----- began exploiting us it would make me very angry, but I somehow continued to work despite the exploitation because I had a small baby to feed. Soon I raised objections and then they pointed out to me those other women who did not object. They did this to isolate me. So I began talking to these women to motivate them to join me. The women slowly began to get my point and we spoke about this more regularly at lunch/break time... Some supported us and some opposed us, but we went ahead with our plans... Our first meeting was at the Central Library near the Shajahani Park, around 300 women participated... We were underestimated at that time by the government, but they were yet to taste the real power of women.

Interestingly, she talks about the induction of the male member in the Sangathan, who later went on to become the leader, in purely pragmatic terms:

----- was brought in because we needed some assistance with writing and clerical work. We also had educated girls with us, my niece was a graduate, but she did not have any experience in the field of social work to be able to write petitions/applications.

This is how she describes the conflict of interest that became the bane of the social movement:

Once I went to Delhi to meet the members of parliament with our demands for compensation, livelihood and pension. Our demands were met, but the issue of livelihood was messed up by a lot of people who saw it as an opportunity to make money and fame. It is all now just a pursuit of fame or money. I think it is legitimised to get some money for basic expenses, because social work does not pay, but it is not acceptable to amass wealth.

She does take the names of people she blames, but she distributes the blame equally between men at the helm of affairs and the preferred women:

I was really disheartened by what was going on and I resigned because of that... I did not go back to what I had given up because I did not like the lies and deceit in that profession.

Here is what another voice (tape 11) has to say about motivation:

I get motivated when the government perpetrates injustice on the poor. So I might spend the rest of my life fighting for the cause....It might seem that India is progressing, but it is actually being enslaved by foreign multinationals. Everything is becoming so expensive, even water has a price on it. The poor heath of people reflects on what we are heading towards. What kind of development is the government boasting about?

She remembers a "memorable demonstration":

My most memorable demonstration was in Delhi at the Supreme Court after the out-of-court settlement. It was quite unique and we had around 10,000 people demonstrating on rotational shifts between Delhi and Bhopal.... Women are in the forefront of the movement because men work. Women also work but they are more flexible. I used to roll beedis [poor man's cigarette] so I brought my stuff with me to the meetings. Lot of women brought their embroidery work. I cannot talk about struggles elsewhere, but in Bhopal men stay away because they are embarrassed to be associated with women's organisation.... This is my life. If I am sick I am worried to stay back home because I might miss out a rally or demonstration. I inform the people at home if I have to go out and I ask them not to bother about me. I might be away for a long time, get arrested or die.

Another voice talks about the role of learning in a social movement (tape 15):

I have learnt a lot from the movement. Women are much more aware and motivated to fight. Women have started coming forward in all spheres of life. It has changed their perspective and revolutionised their thinking on development and politics and many other issues. A group is formed only after women acquire this understanding and not simply after its registration... I feel there should be something to change the social mindset and the way society looks at women... All I want is a solution to my problem.

Here again is a voice that speaks of another memorable action (tape 19):

This protest action happened in Mumbai. We were shouting slogans like "jhadoo maro Dow ko!" (Beat up Dow with broom sticks). Beware of a woman when she picks up her broom stick! I understood why we were fighting against UCC, which was back in the country under a different name, and it had started a new factory in Mumbai. We were there to prevent a Bhopal like disaster happening in Mumbai... The best way to fight the government is to get rid of it during elections. A vote is very valuable, so I vote every time. An MLA came to seek our votes in our basti. He promised us roads, water supply, electricity, but he failed to deliver after his victory. So we all demonstrated in the corporation office and gheraoed [people held temporarily in their office/workplace] the MLA [Member of Parliament]. I contacted a local press to cover the event. The MLA assured us of action but things remain the same (Tape 19).

Here is a voice that looks at innovative protest action as fun and laughter (tape 5):

On one occasion we went to Bhupal Singh's office and we made a lot of noise, using metal plates and spoons. We took a big contingent of people with us, and locked the door from outside. The police arrived and lathi-charged [beat up with sticks] us and threw us into police vans. Three policemen surrounded me, but I pushed them aside and sat inside the van. Later in the police lock up we had a hearty laugh. They seized our plates and spoons and we said, "Is this what you have stooped down to?" We demanded our utensils back and they had to return them. We started playing with them again. Sometimes actions do bring a lot of joy (Tape 5).

It is interesting to observe how the language and analogies are drawn from everyday life. Then they are transformed into symbols of struggle that are rooted in the cultural milieu. It was the familiarity with symbols of protest that enabled women to use them instinctively without making things contentious.

Specialised knowledge co-existed with layman's knowledge, without diluting the seriousness of the issues. It was a two way process. The movement intellectuals saw to it that the rank and file knew what issues that were going to be raised. At the same time, rank and file workers had to carry out instructions in the best possible way. Their task was to intervene at the grassroots level, in a way that kept them rooted to the larger political reality.

Women might think of themselves as lacking in the ability to do paperwork, but they also talked about the need to fight misinformation, and misuse of knowledge. They participated in actions that unveiled corporate secrecy and false propaganda by the State. The only way a social movement was able to demand transparency from the government was by creating "political awareness" at every level. A question that the research assistants put to all the women who were being interviewed was the following: "Did you know what the Carbide factory was manufacturing at the time of the accident?" The answer was a firm no. A few of the women were able to see their own ignorance in relation to the deliberate attempt on the part of the government and the corporation to "hide" the truth. By making this connection, women were able to talk of their learning as liberating from the shackles of ignorance and shortsightedness.

Most of the interviewees endorsed our project on the grounds that it gave them space to talk about their experience of breaking free from generations of enslavement to lies and moribund ideas. They spoke about the need to keep on fighting for justice till they died. But they did need organizational support and sense of solidarity with all those who were part of the struggle. Any definition of comprehensive action meant lifelong dedicated work at the community level, along with revision of legislations by professionals who were inducted into organizations on a voluntary basis. Lastly, they welcomed writers and researchers who could use their scholarly work to build the right kind of public opinion.

The vision of a gender sensitive and just society

In this section we look at the utopian vision of a just and gender sensitive world, which found expression in some of the narratives collected by the Study Group. Yet nothing in the lived reality of the Bhopal survivors' life spelt hope for such a vision. In that case, where did this vision come from?

Reading through the transcripts of interviews we realised that this vision was integrated with demands made by the survivor groups, which in turn became the bulwark of the struggle for justice in Bhopal. In an important sense, we were looking at a research module that was able to bring narratives, abstractions and politics within a single framework. Thus, the vision of a just society was not extrapolated into the research model by external factors, but grew indigenously from within the movement. This prevented the vision from becoming static or uniformly applicable to societies across the globe. It was far more piecemeal and homespun from memories of pain, loss and despair.

No doubt, every movement asks for abstractions that will define it in a more academic way. So the vision had to be placed within a timeline that traces the social movement from its earlier demands for short-term relief measures to the more radically oriented demands for justice, corporate accountability, setting up of an empowered commission, cleaning up of the toxic site by applying the polluter pays principle, and the right to a life of dignity. A great deal of thought and planning went into scripting these long-term demands. In more ways than one, this vision became an embodiment of all the abstractions we had listed earlier. The next step was to find ways and means by which it could be shaped through collective decision making. So the moot question remained unanswered. If environmental justice, class conflict were able to shape this utopian vision, then why was gender falling short?

It is in the context of this niggling question that we will take another look at gender as a conceptual tool that carried forward the vision of a just society. In the case of Bhopal, this vision included demands made by people who had suffered the horrific consequences of an unjust social system. Justice demanded an equitable distribution of resources, as well as listening to voices that had got drowned by middle class rhetoric. Do these voices include women's voices? Going through our filed list of people we spoke to, we found an even count of men and women. We also discovered that the profile of women who were the spokesperson of their organisations indicated their formal position within the organisation, their proximity to the leaders in the group, the length of their involvement and their contribution to the groups.

We also realized how difficult it was for the impacted community to envisage a gender sensitive society, given the deeply ingrained nature of the prevalent patriarchal society we all live in, in India. It was in this context that the international face of the movement helped women to know more about the world outside. This was particularly so when the survivors met volunteers who came to Bhopal from different parts of the globe. While some of the women we interviewed commented mildly on the alien lifestyle of foreigners, others were more skeptical about the cultural difference. In all probability, women's emancipation was a threat to the male members of the family, and Bhopali women were not willing to take the risk of disturbing their family life.

However, the vision of a gender sensitive society gathered strength through oral history and its multiple narratives. At the same time, we are aware of the fact that personal stories cannot speak on behalf of all the other women, who continued to be hemmed in by patriarchal norms, both inside the family and outside. So the gendered vision of a better world remained an idea that could not be seen as universally applicable. The women survivors of Bhopal did sing feminist songs and held up banners with feminist slogans, but none of this existed outside the movement, and at the end of the day, they went back to their patriarchal homes.

One of the main hurdles faced by the research assistants, when they conducted interview sessions inside the homes of the interviewee, was curiously enough, both a logistic problem and that of patriarchal control. Most houses had barely

one or two rooms, and given the large number of people living under one roof, there was virtually no privacy. So, the researcher was often caught in the bind of having men folks in the family dictating what should be said, or women becoming cautious in the presence of male members of the family. A lot of women's issues relating to the chemically ravaged bodies were deeply private and some women refused to talk on record. The same pattern followed in the grassroots organisations, where permission to speak to the Study Group had to come from male leaders in the group. Thus, we were told that Abdul Jabbar was unhappy that we had interviewed Rabiya Bee because she had fallen out with him. Similar anxieties were displayed by almost all the male group leaders.

Winning the trust of the interviewee became one of the prime tasks of the research assistants. Tarunima came up with a solution, which was time-consuming, but useful for our purpose. She visited the families alone, and discussed their problems privately, without using the tape recorder. She noted down their statements in her field diary, and she and Dharmesh modified the questions, keeping in mind the problem areas. Coming up with contingent plans was an essential part of doing fieldwork with a community that is trying to recover from trauma. But the risk of using modified research techniques was both a functional and ethical problem. It led to greater subjectivity, which in turn became the problem of authenticity. Like it or not, the Study Group had to underplay the academic nature of work done, by bringing in felt stories, based on experiences of trauma. For the interviewee this offered a platform where she/he could speak out without fear of being chastised or discarded for not being authentic. It is this therapeutic role played by the very nature of the "spoken word" that made interview sessions personal in a way that research is never meant to be. At the same time, modified theoretical frameworks kept away from any standardised research methodology, by discovering more indigenous, oral traditions that borrowed ideas and conventions from specifically rooted cultural practice.

Here are some of the interesting conclusions that we arrived at by speaking to women survivors. Our research methods probed into the more realistic picture of why large scale participation of women in the movement, did not guarantee changes in gender practice in the family. More importantly, what impact did our research findings have on the gender regimes in the wider community? Lastly, could the Study Group arrive at alternative feminist positions and discovery of renegotiated femininities that operated from within hegemonic masculinities?⁶ None of these questions can be answered promptly. So in the next section we

⁶ The concept of "emphasised femininities" was popularised by Connell in his (2005) essay, "Hegemonic masculinities: rethinking the concept." Women survivors were known for certain characteristic personality traits, which were not seen as individual acquisitions but more collective in nature. Since the organisations to which the women belonged were largely personality driven, a lot of premium was given to commitment, loyalty and selflessness. Here again women were seen as types and not individuals. Emphasised femininity was the culturally accepted attributes that found a firm footing in social norms, especially when it was placed against hegemonic masculinity.

bring in types of femininity and how they operate in an ethnographic study of an industrial disaster.

Types of femininity

Once again we turn back to Foucault's description of a "silent content" that gets revealed in the celebratory song of empowerment of women survivors who were part of the social movement. By highlighting differences rather than homogeneity in any discursive formation, Foucault encourages us to replace notions of exclusion by ideas of intervention. In his own words: "Each discourse contains the power to say something other than what it actually says and thus to embrace a plurality of meaning" (Foucault 1969: 134).

It was the invisible power of intervention that described the type of women's power that we did get to see in a large section of women who had joined the social movement from its inception, and have continued to remain in the forefront of the struggle to this day. This power suited the patriarchal family, for women entered the battleground without the need to discard their role as daughter and mother. Here I would like to juxtapose Western thinking with Indian variations, particularly in the case of such important issues as "cognitive praxis" (Eyerman and Jamison 1996: 45-93) and "contentious performances" (Tilly 2008: 31-61). The model used by Eyerman and Jamison focuses on the process of articulating the movement identity (cognitive praxis) by key participants (movement intellectuals) within the contexts of articulation (political cultures and institutions). (1996: 4). Are these theories applicable in the Indian context? The answer is both yes and no in a cautious way.

Eyerman and Jamison were talking about an approach that combined material conditions and consciousness in a way that made cognitive praxis strategic and instrumental. However, the Indian way of looking at things rarely allowed for women to play an active role in the public domain. Therefore, consciousness was kept apart from material conditions. What we saw as large scale participation of women in a mass movement, was really a strategic game plan made by movement intellectuals, to use women as the "face" of the disaster and its aftermath. This can be tied up with Tilly's description of "contentious performances." Tilly used the theatrical metaphor of performances and repertoires to describe the "historically embedded nature of contentious politics" (2008: 14). It was the need to appear in large numbers that spoke of women power as collective strength rather than acquiring individual identity. So a lot of importance was given to life experiences, the language and symbols drawn from the cultural milieu and the deliberate organising that goes into making collective claims.

Praxis and performances occupied a liminal space where new types of knowledge making were brought in to serve people. Given the nature of street performances in India, resistance was drawn from our rich cultural traditions. Survivor groups used our age-old, non-violent methods of protest. So satyagraha, hunger strikes, die-in, padyatras [march on foot], peaceful

processions, and candle light vigils become time tested ways of registering protest. Women took the lead in organising these events, and at the same time, they were more than willing to spare their men folk, on the grounds of traditional division of labour between men and women. It is this paradoxical situation that defines women's power in the Indian context.

However, to say that an ideology becomes redundant in the face of contingent factors is to simplify the dynamics of the problem. It was here that oral history offered some ready solutions. As pointed out earlier, women were able to convey complex ideas in simple pictorial images. So it was their rendering of the vision to an illiterate mass population that became an instant hit. In other words, the vision of a gendered and a just society was not patented to belong to the upper class; it grew from within mass struggles. In Bhopal, once women's presence in the mass movement became visible, the next step was to maintain continuity through persistence. If there is one strength that the Bhopal movement can speak about, it is the dogged nature of their belief in fighting the system that had betrayed them. Twenty-six years later nothing seems to have diminished their ardour to carry on with the struggle for justice.

In real terms, this persistence symbolises the invasion of people's power into cultural spaces that were considered sacrosanct for the middle class. Thus, every street action that makes breaking news on television or becomes the headline news in newspapers, acts as reminder of what had gone wrong with the development model. This added to the worldwide recognition that the images of Bhopal have gained, in celebrity photographs, documentary films, and YouTube video clippings have become the strength of the movement. Therefore, Bhopal has got support from different parts of the world. The survivor groups have also realized the possibilities of getting what they want by utilizing the demands of electoral politics. Women were pushed to the forefront of the social movement because their narratives, though marginal in the real distribution of power, had an emotive appeal that made their stories sell. Despite the fact that gender issues relating to specific medical and social problems were ill-addressed in most rehabilitation schemes, women's power soon acquired a market value.

Grassroots leadership depended on women to carry on with the battle for justice. Most women looked up to male leaders for inspiring them. Group leaders were seen as caring, paternalistic, and domineering, which in many ways described hegemonic masculinity as nothing more than the organisational space becoming a replica of a home away from home. Women spoke of their admiration for male leaders purely on the grounds of the sacrifices they had made. So a lot of women power was pledged to serve the leadership by implementing their vision as faithfully as possible. Women hardly complained against the two-tier level of leadership. They did not see themselves in direct conflict with male leaders; nor were they complaining about the way policy decisions were made. But women did talk about another form of organisational betrayal. They felt that organisations allowed for select women to become more prominent than others. So in the final analysis the competition was with other women. The usual complaint was against the marked improvement in the living

condition of these favoured women, as well as greater exposure in the media. This was seen as exploitation of women power, and though it was often dismissed as a strategic decision made to bring the social movement back into the limelight, it did prove to be de-motivating and often took away from these neglected women, their sense of belonging to the social movement.

Concluding remarks

Going back to the historical timeline, we see how the year 1994 had become a watershed in the history of the movement. The government decided to mark the decade as the year of closure. Rehabilitations schemes were closed down, the work-sheds, which had been lying in disuse, were handed over to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), and the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) decided to wind up all the research projects they had started. The infamous settlement of 1989 was seen as the maximum bargain that India could manage with a powerful nation and an equally powerful corporation (Baxi 1986).

It was an ominous move in the context of globalisation and India's neo-liberal economic policies. The survivor groups faced a new challenge of opposing a state that was in collusion with the callous and criminal corporation. Every social movement has to strategise its action plans in keeping with material changes. The internationalisation of the Bhopal movement was part of this change, brought on by the new global scenario and the accompanying political opportunities.

A new dimension to the tragedy came to the forefront with the horrific discovery that the chemical waste at the factory site had seeped into the ground water and contaminated the water table. The abandoned factory had become a toxic hotspot and Bhopal qualified as a case study of environmental pollution.⁷ New issues arose about the cleanup of the factory site and the possibility of applying the polluter pays principal. Meanwhile, Union Carbide merged with Dow Chemicals in 2001, so that the offending corporation practically disappeared, and the new company refused to take any liability for the past.

ICJB shifted to macro-level issues relating to environmental pollution. It was felt that the need of the hour was international solidarity, and an increased effort to make Bhopal more visible in the global scenario. BGPMSKS joined ICJB, and activism that had begun in the workplace of the government run stationary sheds acquired a worldwide recognition. Since BGPMSKS was run by two remarkable women leaders, Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla, the social movement concentrated on bringing women to the forefront of the struggle. Bhopal needed new tools to fight its battle. This is where the repertoires and language of activism began to change. What had been a battle for survival at the local level, changed into a full-fledged battle for human rights,

⁷ In this connection see the reports brought out by Amnesty International (2004) and Greenpeace (1999).

and the accompanying principle of justice. This was only possible by restoring principles of equitable distribution and sustainability. Systems of knowledge and technology were no longer viewed as value neutral. A new lexicon was created to promote a gender sensitive, chemical free environment.

It was in this context that the Study Group launched its oral history project by interviewing members of all the organisations that are active today. We discovered that our attempt to understand the local/global nexus brought us close to organisations so that we could get a comprehensive understanding of differences. In the process, we were able to win the confidence of local groups, which in turn helped us to understand micro level issues without losing sight of the macro level concerns. As archival material, which unravels the complex story of human greed, systemic failure, travesty of justice, and the power play between the US and third world countries, it opens up new areas of research in anthropological studies. Since we hope to make these anonymised transcripts available online, we believe that it will further the cause for documenting an event of such magnitude. At the same time, it will promote easy access to primary material in a way that critiques the "corporate veil", and its diabolic effect on a hapless community. A movement that began in the women's selai centres, and continued even after the centres were closed down, becomes representative of women's power and integrity. In the final analysis it is this sustaining power of people's struggle for justice that makes Bhopal a unique case study.

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