

The injustice that education does to the environment: A story from a survivor

December 3 2019, by Radhika Iyengar



A women's rally on December 2, 2012 — the 28th anniversary of the Bhopal gas tragedy. Victims are still waiting for justice and compensation for their injuries and lost loved ones. Photo: Bhopal Medical Appeal/Flickr CC

I am a survivor of the Bhopal gas tragedy, which is considered to be the world's worst industrial disaster. By writing this piece, I will do what most residents of the city of Bhopal dislike doing, which is to relive the tragedy. But even though many years have passed, I must write about it because I have an important story to tell, and because we can learn from it when dealing with today's environmental disasters and the climate crisis.

The night of December 2nd, 1984 was a normal night until about 4 am. I remember someone knocking hard at our main door. It was our neighbor. He yelled out, "Gas tank has leaked." My mother, who opened the door, looked bewildered. But our neighbor insisted that we could die any minute and asked us to put a wet cloth over our eyes and noses. Another family friend from the main city rushed to our home with his pregnant wife on a two-wheeler scooter. My sister and I were dragged from our beds and made to wear our shoes and sweaters. It looked like we were ready to go somewhere, but where were we going? No one knew the real story yet. All we knew was that some poisonous gas was released and that we were about to die. On the streets, we could hear "run," "run." Run where? How? My mother started to pack some food and water and put it in our jeep. We then looked around; we had five adults, two kids, two dogs, one cat, and one parrot in our house. Who should we leave behind? There was no way we could all fit in an old-style army jeep. Meanwhile, the road near our house that is an exit from Bhopal city was already choked. My mother and aunt looked at us and decided to take out all the things from the jeep as there was no way to go.

Although we didn't have much information at the time, we later learned the emergency was caused by a leak at the Union Carbide India Limited pesticide factory, not far from our home. Water got into one of the factory's tanks and caused a runaway chemical reaction that ended up venting 40 tonnes of methyl isocyanate into the air. This extremely toxic

chemical can cause coughing, chest pain, asthma, irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, lung edema and death. The gas cloud also likely contained chloroform, dichloromethane, hydrogen chloride, and other toxic and flammable gases.

It was around 6 am in the morning, and our eyes started to water. Our cat looked visibly upset; my sister made her sit in her lap to comfort her. We waited to die. Horns and cars and people all were making so much noise that after a while, I didn't know whether the horns or my itchy eyes were making me more upset. My mother, a social activist, decided to venture out by 9 am to see how she could help. She has worked with the Missionaries of Charity for many years and was a personal friend of Mother Teresa. The Missionaries of Charity had an old white van with a green border running lengthwise, and with my mom driving her "army" jeep, they set-out to the Union Carbide Factory area to help out. The Sisters had eye-drops that they collected from their homes. My mother says that they would open the doors of shacks and shanties in a quiet neighborhood to find dead bodies. For the lucky ones who were still alive, the sisters would give them eye-drops to relieve them from pain. The next day, when most people were fleeing the city, Mother Theresa came to Bhopal with many more eye drops.

My family and I were lucky to survive the disaster because the wind was in the other direction. But my Bhopal city was [devastated](#). Piles of dead bodies on trolleys had to be taken to a common burial ground. Families were killed in seconds. The train that crossed Bhopal junction in the night had no survivors. December 3rd was a rude shock for the city, which quite frankly it has never recovered from.

The official number of dead had reached an estimate of 5,000-8,000, but in reality, it was well over 20,000, with 200,000 more physically disabled in some form. The "City of Lakes" had water that was probably infected, too—in the years to come, many tests were done, but the newspapers

didn't adequately carry the results. What was very visible were the organized protests on the streets by local and international NGOs. Many lawsuits in the United States and Bhopal flooded the courts to demand justice. "No more Bhopals" slogans were everywhere.

My sister and I were kids, and to us observers, it was very evident that people were miserable and demanding justice. Women held street marches. Angry and crying people organized Chakka Jam, or traffic jams, on the roads. It seemed that women of all religions were united and joined various movements across the city to fight for their rights to be compensated for their injuries and lost loved ones.

Normalcy (whatever that means) eventually resumed, and our school started. Our teachers continued to teach our curriculum from the textbooks. A couple of years later, when we were in middle school, I began to see appearances of the Bhopal gas tragedy in our books. "What is the name of the poisonous gas that was released in Bhopal?" Fill in the blank. "What is the name of the factory that released the gas in Bhopal" Fill in the blank. As a student who was supposed to do well in class, I mugged-up the "right" answers for class assessments. Meanwhile the courts were busy figuring out the appropriate compensation amount that needed to be given to the victims. Local and international non-profits were fighting for justice on behalf of the residents of Bhopal who were either physically handicapped or for the families who has lost their relatives. Processions on the streets continued and the gas victims' tears never dried-up.

By 2011, the law cases were over, but the lawyers created a full repository of cases —Rasheeda Bibi versus Bhopal Union Carbide/Dow Chemicals—to teach their students in law schools. Amnesty International and Green Peace carried on the Bhopal baton at the Earth Summit 2002, including a Bhopal bus that traveled to various parts of Europe. Jabbar Bhai's "Bhopal Gas Peedith Mahila Udyog Sanghathan," Satyu Sarangi's

Sambhava Trust, and Indira Iyengar's Mahashakti Seva Kendra continued their plea to the Government to give appropriate space for skill-development for women, provision of work sheds and appropriate compensation.

However, there was one significant missing piece. The children in school still learned only a few fill-in-the-blanks. My entire generation did not see Bhopal's environmental crisis discussed and debated through the textbooks. In 2011, with Monisha Bajaj, I analyzed the national and state level curriculum to find trends in the treatment of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Our paper pointed to a couple of noteworthy things.

- School education is not adequately addressing local environmental issues. Therefore the link with the students' immediate environment and what they learn in school is weak.
- Teaching about environmental issues is complicated and messy, so it is easier to stick to factual science.
- The way [environmental education](#) was taught in classrooms had very little critical thinking involved.
- Education for [sustainable development](#) that should address all the pillars of sustainable development—economic, social (health, education), peace and security (social justice), and environment—was not yet integrated into the curriculum and the syllabus and thus the textbooks.

Education has done significant injustice to the environment. Justice issues present in Bhopal were not reflected in the textbooks decades later. The same year, 2011, the national board of education (National Council for Educational Research and Training, NCERT) announced that the social science textbook for class (grade) 8 would have a detailed account of the gas tragedy. For the first time after 27 years of the gas tragedy, education was doing some justice to the treatment of what is called the "Hiroshima of the Chemical Industry." Bhopal coverage in the

class 8 textbook included photographs of the incidents, victims, deaths, and protests. Education experts locally and internationally felt that this inclusion in the syllabus was too late. Arvind Sardhana, who is a part of the national textbook development committee, noted that the idea of including Bhopal gas came when it was decided at the policy level that subjects dealing with civics would offer critical and informed choices instead of attempting to make students 'loyal citizens.'

Maybe the education community is celebrating this (small) victory, but at many levels, this lag of the textbooks in keeping up with environmental disasters is hugely troubling. Are we doing justice to the children who lived a different reality than they read about in textbooks? The people who protested in the streets, including the womens leader Rasheeda Bibi, were illiterate. What role does education play in providing environmental justice by enlightening people's minds? Or are we supposed to just live the reality, join protests along with our children who now have to [strike for climate justice](#)?

It is time the education community [becomes a conduit](#) through which people can become knowledgeable, fight for their rights and get the justice they demand. It is extremely important how schools, textbooks and educators treat the global climate crisis and other environmental disasters. Let us not take decades to teach children how to become eco-activists. Let education be the conduit for "No More Bhopals."

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