

Book Review

**Bhopal Survivors Speak:
emergent voices from a people's movement**

Bhopal Survivors' Movement Study
Word Power Books, Edinburgh 2009

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When there is a disaster on the scale of Bhopal the media coverage always tends to deal in the number of deaths, the “official” facts and the statistics, rather than the human stories behind the media headlines. *Bhopal Survivors Speak* manages to get behind the headline story of the gas explosion and gives insight into a number of the survivors who have demanded justice in India, in their own communities and in their own families. The stories are about the personal journeys people take that leads them into activism, how they take on the people who have power at all levels and, importantly, affect change and get results. The book explains the different ways people and communities define the issues, and it demonstrates that there is never one answer or solution that is going to satisfy everyone.

The book starts with a clear explanation of the methodology of the research that went into collecting voices from the people's movement which have been actively campaigning for justice over the past 25 years. It is a travesty that the campaign for justice still needs to continue after all these years. The movement has a new generation of campaigners- “Educated, articulate and angry, the young people of Bhopal are taking receipt of the baton of responsibility for the demand for justice.”p47

One of the aims of the book was to collect “really useful” research as distinct from merely “useful”. Its usefulness is to be judged by “movements of the oppressed who are struggling for their own empowerment”. The book outlines the diverse roots of the Bhopal survivors movement through in-depth interviews with eighteen individuals and prominent voices from different political, religious and academic backgrounds. This highlights that there is never one route to activism especially when the activism is a response to a disaster on the scale of Bhopal.

All the interviews give a unique insight into the development of individual journeys which were the building blocks of the movement. There is a sense that action for justice started in the early hours of the disaster and developed in different directions depending on the needs of the survivors. The interviews give insight into the value placed on the wide range of contributions from survivors and “outsiders”, the educated and the illiterate, all with their unique insight into possible solutions and for the fight for justice.

The book makes the distinction between ‘victims’ and ‘survivors’ and highlights the difference between charity and solidarity, which is an essential element of the wider global environmental justice movement today. The survivors have their own story to tell and can often tell it with more passion and sincerity than “outsiders” who try to speak on their behalf. In 2005 I heard a survivor of Bhopal speak as part of the Amnesty International 20th anniversary tour demanding justice. Hearing personal testimony is an important element of raising solidarity. The recent environmental justice campaign in the UK against the Royal Bank of Scotland investment in Canadian Tar Sands is as much a campaign in solidarity with the Canadian First Nation Indigenous communities than just a targeted campaign against the banks investments. Like the activists from Bhopal the Canadians I have heard in Scotland are more than able to tell their own story and outline the injustice in their communities - looking for solidarity not charity. People must be able to speak for themselves and there are different views on the role outsiders amongst the activists interviewed in the book. Greenpeace came in for criticism by some for trying to speak on behalf of the Bhopal movement and using their scientific expertise for their own publicity. “They have made Bhopal into a commodity and destroyed its importance” p81.

There is learning in this book for anyone who wants to try and represent communities experiencing injustice. How can you represent all the different views without dialogue between the different individuals, groups and interested parties which make up the wider community. Who has the right, as an individual or as a group, to express the views of a community as a whole? How do you get the story to a wider audience when there is no one narrative and many issues to highlight and address?

On the night of the 3rd December 2009, the 25th Anniversary of the Bhopal disaster I was giving a talk to a church group in Grangemouth, beside Scotland’s largest chemical industrial estate, on the theme of environmental justice. Most of the women in the audience had heard the news that evening about Bhopal and the concerns raised by Greenpeace about the high levels of contamination in the drinking water 25 years after the leak. I attempted to get the women to think of their own experiences of living next to the chemical industry in Scotland and to think about the impact a disaster on the scale of Bhopal would have.

I have been involved in popular education projects collecting experiences within the town of Grangemouth with the aim of making links to other communities. With the global reach of the corporations who operate in the town there are numerous opportunities to compare and contrast the themes of environmental justice across the globe. This gives people a wider context to discuss their own experiences and an opportunity to build solidarity with communities worse off than their own. Communities need to hold corporations and governments to account and ensure that their safety is not undermined for corporate profit. Bhopal will always be a lesson of what can go wrong when corporations try and cut corners.

“What happened in Bhopal has already happened but we need to join forces to stop it from happening again anywhere in the world.” Rasheeda Bee p113