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A Cultural Analysis of Conflicts in Industrial Disaster*

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Industrial disasters create occasions for the eruption of multiple conflicts among stakeholders. Victims' perspective on these conflicts has received little research attention in the past. Understanding these conflicts can lead to insights into the political nature of such disasters, and aid in developing more humane responses to them. This paper provides a cultural analysis of social conflicts that emerged in the Bhopal tragedy. It examines victims' subjective understanding of the tragedy and associated conflicts by analyzing a demonstration march by them. Victims' understanding of conflicts is significantly different from that of the government that supposedly represents them. This finding has important policy implications, and warrants further research on conflicts in industrial disasters.

Industrial conflicts have taken many forms in the past. Conflicts between labor and management, consumers and manufacturers, social activists and corporations, developing country governments and multinational corporations, have been studied by sociologists and organizational theorists. Rapid industrialization of countries (especially economically developing countries) has brought new occasions for the eruption of conflicts, such as, conflicts caused by industrial disasters.

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Industrial disasters are large scale industrial accidents, environmental pollution incidents, and product injury cases, that have the potential for killing, injuring, or otherwise affecting, large numbers of people and the natural environment. Dioxin poisoning in Seveso (1976), toxic waste at Love Canal (1979), the propane gas explosion in Mexico City (November, 1984), the uncontrolled emission of methyl isocyanate gas in Bhopal (December, 1984), and the Chernobyl nuclear reactor meltdown (April, 1986) in the Soviet Union, are examples of such disasters. These disasters can create new types of conflicts involving different sets of victims and stakeholders. Disaster victims include, workers in industrial facilities, communities in which these facilities are located, consumers or indirect users of products, and even unborn children of affected people. Stakeholders involved in such disasters include victims, government agencies, corporations, non-governmental relief agencies, international organizations, legal and medical professions, and political parties (Shrivastava 1987).

While accidents have been happening virtually from the time of the industrial revolution, major industrial disasters are a relatively new phenomenon. Hence, public awareness about their causes and consequences is low. However, liabilities associated with industrial disasters are very high. With the advent of high risk technologies, such as, nuclear energy and weapons, chemicals, genetics, air and space travel, etc., the damage potential of accidents has reached unprecedented levels (Kates 1977; Perrow 1984).

The study of industrial accidents has been the domain of industrial safety engineers, insurance companies, corporate and government policy makers and regulatory agencies. Traditionally it has had a technical and economic orientation. Only recently have social scientists started exploring social and cultural dimensions of industrial disasters and technological risks (Sill et al. 1982; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). These analyses have focused largely on the human aspects (in contrast to technical aspects) that contribute to **causing** industrial accidents. These include, psychological aspects of risk perception that constrain social policies on hazardous technologies, human factors in the design, operation and organizational control of technological systems, and corporate, social and government responsibilities for preventing accidents (Lawless 1977; Norris 1982; Perrow 1984).

This focus on human aspects causing accidents needs to be supplemented with analyses of human and social **consequences** of industrial disasters. One consequence of disasters, that deserves of research attention, is the nature of social conflicts it creates. Understanding these social conflicts can provide a deeper understanding of industrial disasters and aid in developing better responses to them. It can throw new light on how society makes choices and trade offs with regard to hazardous technologies.

Social conflicts in industrial accidents can be studied from a variety of perspectives. Historically, since the main victims of accidents were workers, conflicts in these situations were assimilated into a traditional labor-management conflict framework, through the establishment of a variety of safety-compensation apparatus (National Safety Council 1969). But now industrial disasters involve more diverse sets of victims, such as, consumers, neighboring communities, neighboring countries, and unborn children of affected persons, necessitating a boarder framework for examining social conflicts.

Social conflicts refer to conflicts of interest among different social groups. Groups may be identified by economic class, gender, race, religion, nationality or other salient social characteristic. In industrial disasters conflicting groups are primarily defined by their association with causes and consequences of the disaster. Groups associated with causing the disaster, e.g., corporations, government agencies, are in direct conflict with groups that suffer its consequences, e.g., victims and their sympathizers. The conflict is over control of resources for compensating victims, ameliorating effects of the disaster, and normalizing life in the community. These resources are usually supplied by owners of the facility that was the source of disaster and governmental agencies. Through legal and political battles victims attempt to gain access to these resources. While such struggles have been explored in sociology literature (Berman 1978; Levine 1982), the cultural analysis of conflicts in industrial disasters remains largely unresearched. This study examines social conflicts from a cultural perspective by analyzing its manifestation in systems of symbols and discourse.

Social conflicts are often manifested in symbolic-expressive dimension of life. By examining empirical regularities in this dimension it is possible to understand how symbolic acts become meaningful and em-

powering in conflict situations. Observable objects, acts, events, and utterances in social conflicts and related interactions, serve as the subject matter for understanding 'meaning' that individuals attribute to them. Meanings are subjective and can be approached by participating (actually or vicariously) in conflict situations. They are not easily tractable through the verifiability and reliability criteria of normal scientific inquiry (Wuthnow et al. 1984).

Meaning creation involves the use of preconceived frames of reference, and is a process of reconstruction rather than discovery. Language is the most commonly used medium for expressing and codifying meanings. Language based cultural analysis is a powerful tool for understanding social conflicts. Communicative actions in the form of linguistic utterances and discourse reveal implicit understandings about social situations (Habermas 1970, 1979).

This paper analyzes social conflicts in a historical world event - the Bhopal tragedy, by examining songs and slogans used by victims to unite themselves to fight for their rights, express their frustrations, and resolve some perceived conflicts. It begins with a brief description of the theoretical perspective that guided the study. Empirical evidence from the tragic accident is used to identify conflicts and their resolution. Some implications of this analysis for understanding cultural aspects of industrial disasters are explored.

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The cultural analysis presented here, keys off a critical theory perspective best represented by the work of the Frankfurt School. For us understanding of subjective meanings is the core of liberative social and cultural analysis. By explicating, consciously examining, and critiquing them, individuals can experience greater freedom from domination. Language and communication make subjective meanings available to observers by redeeming certain validity claims necessary for reaching understanding. Language is the medium for expressing subjective meanings, legitimating social norms, conveying facts and making communications possible. The role of language is described in the following terms.

> The universality of the validity claims inherent in the structure of speech can perhaps be elucidated with reference to the systematic place of language. Language is the medium through which speakers and hearers realize certain fundamental demarcations. The subject demarcates himself: (1) from an environment that he objectifies in the third-person attitude of an observer; (2) from an environment that he conforms to or deviates from in the ego-alter attitude of a participant; (3) from his own subjectivity that he expresses or conceals in a first-person attitude; and finally (4) from the medium of langauge itself. For those domains of reality I have proposed the somewhat arbitrarily chosen terms: external nature, society, internal nature, and language. The validity claims unavoidable implied in speech oriented to reaching understanding show that these four regions must always simultaneously appear (Habermas 1979, p. 66).

Speech acts, which are observable forms of behavior, can serve as a tangible unit of analysis. They may be simple verbal or written utterances or complex formations such as conversations, books, poems or songs. Poetry represents a stylized and highly expressive form of linguistic discourse. It is perhaps the most effective method of capturing emotive social experiences that lie at the core of social conflicts. Songs, slogans, anthems, and other variations of the poetic form of discourse, are culturally legitimized symbols of critical social historical experiences. They are embedded in a wider social political context, which they help interpret.

The propositional content of speech acts must be distinguished from implicit rules of interaction that are conveyed by them. These implicit rules reveal patterns that are of practical significance. Habermas (1979) proposed Universal Pragmatics, as a general theory of speech actions. It describes the fundamental rules that subjects master, to competently employ sentences in utterances in order to reach understanding.

Speech acts are important because they are the building blocks of discourse. Assumptions and procedures of discourse are the basis for establishing 'truth' (of statements) and 'correctness' (of social norms). Rational discourse can lead to the determination of common interest without deception. It can thus be a means for resolving conflicts. The

force of discourse lies in its universalization, characterized by generalizable interests and access to participation in discourse. This universalization of discourse is embedded in the very nature of speech. As Habermas argues in his theory of communicative competence, rules for using sentences in discourse are 'transcendental'. Understanding these rules is essential for meaningful communications. Habermas introduces his model of communicative competence in the following terms.

> The model intuitively introduced here is that of a communication in which grammatical sentences are embedded, by way of universal validity claims, in three relations to reality, thereby assuming the corresponding pragmatic functions of representing facts, establishing legitimate interpersonal relations, and expressing one's own subjectivity. According to this model, language can be conceived as the medium of interrelating three worlds; for every successful communicative action there exists a threefold relation between the utterance and (a) "the external world" as the totality of existing states of affairs, (b) "our social world" as the totality of all normatively regulated interpersonal relations that count as legitimate in a given society, and (c) "a particular inner world" (of the speaker) as the totality of his intentional experience (Habermas 1979, p. 67).

Social conflict, competition and strategic action in general represent derivatives of communicative action, e.g., action oriented to reaching understanding. They can be examined by studying the emergence and content of related discourse. Discourse involving social conflicts is distorted in several respects because of power differentials between parties in discourse. Dominant groups have better access to information and discourse forums. Their goals and interests are generally better known and accepted. They often possess more legitimacy in society. By engaging in discourse oppressed groups attempt to overcome these distortions and gain control over resources. Discourse also helps to uncover the real nature of conflicts. It subjects unstated assumptions to explicit scrutiny. Discourse can be a powerful tool for emancipation of oppressed groups, it can also simultaneously serve as an instrument of social control. With

this theoretical perspective we present below a cultural analysis of social conflicts in the Bhopal tragedy.

METHOD

The objective of the study was to understand the nature of social conflicts that result from industrial disasters. The worst industrial accident in human history occurred on December 2/3, 1984 in Bhopal, India. Over 2,000 people were killed and over 200,000 others were injured by poisonous Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) gas that escaped from a storage tank at a pesticides manufacturing plant of Union Carbide (I) Ltd. Because of the scale of the disaster and the multiple conflicts it created, this event provided a strategic setting for the study.

Data for this study came from the following sources:

(a) personal interviews with over 100 persons including, victims, observers, government officials, social worker, politicians, and Union Carbide employees in Bhopal ;
(b) the author's participation in relief work in Bhopal;
(c) newspaper and magazine reports in India and U.S.A.;
(d) reports from Union Carbide and the Government of India.

Analysis of data was interpretive. It attempted to understand conflicts from the point of view of victims. Understanding subjective meanings of victims requires intimate knowledge of their backgrounds, living conditions, social relations, cultural traditions, and political and legal frameworks. Participant observation allows acquisition of some of this knowledge. The researcher possessed this knowledge by virtue of having lived in Bhopal for 23 years. After the accident he spent three weeks in December 1984 and January 1985, interviewing people and participating in relief operations. The key event around which interpretation of conflicts are built was a demonstration march on January 3, 1985. March participants were interviewed before and after the march to ensure that interpretations represented here were accurate.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF BHOPAL

Bhopal was established as a town around 1010 AD by a King named Raja Bhoj. Because of its strategic central location and two large lakes supplying water, for centuries it was a battle ground for local feuding rulers. In early 1700s, the city was consolidated as the capital of a feudal state of the Moslem Chieftain Dost Mohammed Khan. Until India gained independence in 1948, the city remained under the rule of Moslem Nawabs under the protection of the British colonial government. This history gave Bhopal some unique cultural characteristics. It has a large proportion of Moslems in a predominantly Hindu country. Its architecture, social customs, language dialect (Bhopali dialect is a combination of Hindi and Urdu), social institutions have been heavily influenced by its Moslem history. The Nawabs of Bhopal were feudal landlords who derived all their income from agricultural sources. They did nothing to attract industry into the area or build an urban industrial infrastructure.

In 1956, Bhopal (pop. 125,000) was made the capital of the State of Madhya Pradesh, the largest, and one of the least industrially developed states of India. In 1984, the population had grown to about 800,000. The two major employers in the city were the state government and Bharat Heavy Electrical Ltd. (BHEL), a public sector company manufacturing electrical generating equipment. In addition, there were several small scale industries (with less than 500 employees each) located in Industrial Estates in and around the city, which served as ancillary industries to the BHEL plant, or were independent manufacturers. Union Carbide (I) Ltd, was the second biggest industrial employer in Bhopal with about 850 employees.

The two forces that fueled the rapid population growth of Bhopal were not commerce and industry, but its strategic location and natural resources, and its establishment as the seat of the state government. This growth was lopsided because the urban infrastructure of the city did not develop at pace with population growth, a problem common to most urban areas in India (Buch 1983). Industry and its social institutions are relatively new to the city and the state. For example, labor unions, consumer groups, governmental regulatory infrastructure and policies for industrial development, environmental watch dog groups, etc., had marginal presence in Bhopal (Bhopal Development Plan 1975). Some basic socioeconomic data on the city are provided in Table 1.

THE ACCIDENT

The Union Carbide (I) Ltd. plant manufacturing pesticides was located in the densely populated center of the city, less than two miles from Bhopal Railway station that served as hub of commerce and transportation (equivalent to the 'downtown' area of an American city). The plant manufactured and stored large quantities of a highly poisonous chemical called Methy Isocyanate (MIC). People living around the plant, local authorities and medical personnel, and even Union Carbide workers, were not aware of the extreme toxicity of MIC, nor did they have any contingency plans to follow in case of accidental spillage of the chemical.

The MIC manufacturing plant was commissioned in 1981, but was poorly maintained and needed repairs. Since its inception, the plant operated at less than fifty percent capacity, because the demand for Union Carbide pesticides had declined sharply during the past three years. The entire division of the company had been loosing money from the time the plant was established. The company was planning to sell the plant.

It was common practice to manufacture MIC in batches and store it in three large underground tanks under Nitrogen pressure, for use as and when needed. A large quantity (about 60 Tons) of MIC was produced at the end of October 1984, and stored for subsequent usage in Tanks E610 and E611. MIC production unit was then shut down and various parts of the plant were dismantled for maintenance. A few days later operators experienced difficulties in transferring the MIC from Tank E610 for use in a chemical conversion process. They abandoned the tank without investigating the problem, and used MIC from Tank E611 for production. Tank E610 remained unpressurized for several weeks allowing impurities to enter the tank. On the night of December 2, 1984, around 11 P.M., a supervisor asked an operator to wash pipes leading to the storage tanks. This operation was faulty, allowing a large quantity of water to enter in storage tank E610. Soon after, operators noticed buildup of pressure and temperature in the tank. Several

remedial actions were taken but they all failed. A large quantity of MIC was released into the atmosphere in an uncontrolled emission that began at around 1 A.M.

Outside the plant, the city of Bhopal was thrown into complete chaos and panic. No one knew of appropriate emergency procedures, and the medical system did not have the resources to handle the emergency. Before the week ended over two thousand people were reported dead and over two hundred thousand injured. Incalculable damage was done to the physical environment and to the social and economic life of the city. Horror-filled descriptions of the tragedy stunned the world and even

Table 1
Basic Socio-Economic Data on Bhopal (1982-1983)

1. **Population**	672,320 for Bhopal City 895,815 for Bhopal District			
2. **Employment**	**Rural**	**Urban**	**Total**	
Farmers	43,073	4,344	47,417	
Agricultural Laborers	24,272	4,936	29,208	
Household Industries	1,470	11,739	13,109	
Other Workers-(Incudes 69,076 Government employees)	7,925	174,284	182,209	
Limited Workers	10,624	2,073	12,697	
Remaining Total	125,277	485,834	611,111	
3. **Industry & Commerce**				
Energy Consumption		110.32	Million Kilowatt hours	
Energy Consumers		159,000		
Registered Factories		249		
Registered Shops		83,934		
Registered Commercial Establishments		280		
Registered Hotels/Restaurants		110		
Registered Cinema Theatres		16		
Per Capita Production of Food		164.27	Kilogram	
Per Capita Energy Consumption		215	Kilowatt hours	

six months later instances of new injuries and damages were being reported (ARENA 1985; DeGrazia 1985; Morehouse and Subramaniam 1985; Shrivastava 1985).

CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE TRAGEDY

Cultural traits were blamed by some, as part of the reason for the Bhopal tragedy. The argument was roughly as follows: Indian workers at the plant were not acclimated to a culture of technology and hence did not realize the importance of following maintenance and safety procedures. Moreover, communities did not possess the environmental awareness that would make them question and resist the location of hazardous plants in the center of the city. This explanation of the Bhopal tragedy is simplistic and ethnocentric, because it identifies culture as the cause for a series of interrelated failures in design, equipment, procedures, supplies, human errors, organizational policies and government policies.

Cultural traits provided a mechanism for coping with the post accident crisis. There were many uniquely cultural events, totally ignored by the press, that allowed Bhopal to recover (to the extent that it did) from those traumatic experiences. For example, citizen groups spontaneously organized to provide relief to victims before government agencies were mobilized into action. They collected and distributed foods, door-to-door, to feed victims on the morning following the accident. People took total strangers as guests into their homes, and gave them shelter, medical relief and psychological support. People who fled Bhopal, went and stayed in their "Gaanv" (ancestral village) with distant relatives or friends. The cultural system provided a protective network in the critical three to four days immediately following the accident that it took government agencies to mobilize relief efforts (State Level Relief Committee of the Government was formed on 6th December, 1984). Civic cooperation of this type is common during disasters in India and in other cultures (Kreps 1983; Quarantelli 1978).

One cultural phenomenon that was largely ignored by the press was the victims' discourse on conflicts arising from the accident. The main victims of the Bhopal tragedy were economically impoverished, politically powerless, and socially marginal, slum dwellers. They felt vic-

timized both by Union Carbide and the State Government. Their resentment against the company was caused by its ownership of the plant that caused their suffering. Their resentment against the government was based on a lack of adequate relief to ameliorate their suffering.

For several weeks after the accident they were so traumatized that they did not perceive the conflicts surrounding them. The only discourse they participated in was to recount the horrors of the accident to the press, relief agency workers, and Municipal Councilors who represented them in local government agencies. As time passed their dissatisfaction with relief measures increased. However, they had no political voice or resources to directly enter into the discourse on the disaster, which was dominated by Union Carbide, Government agencies, analysts and lawyers. They participated in this discourse indirectly via these agents.

Victims felt the need to vent their anger, frustration, and anguish, perhaps only to convince themselves that they had personally done something about the situation. They also saw the social and legal battles being shaped around the accident events, and wanted to influence relevant debates to their advantage. So they used poetry to express their sentiments and participate in the conflict discourse on the tragedy. In the oral culture that they came from, poetry has strong emotional force to convey deeply felt meanings. Music and poetry has always been an important element of Indian culture.

THE MORCHA

An occasion for entering into the discourse was provided by a peaceful 'Morcha' (demonstrating) march on January 3, 1985, in which over 10,000 victims and their supporters participated. The march was organized by a group of young activists who came from all parts of the country to provide relief services to victims. As part of their relief efforts they educated the victims about their legal rights, concientized them about their exploited conditions, and helped them in uniting their interests and openly voicing their grievances.

The march began at around 9 A.M. at multiple places in the neighborhoods affected by the disaster. Victims gathered around a central point in their neighborhood, carrying placards and banners with verses and slogans. As they marched toward the Union Carbide Plant, they

shouted these slogans and recited verses expressing their frustrations and demands. Small groups of demonstrators from individual neighborhoods merged at the Union Carbide factory gate to form a united front which marched to their own slogans and songs to the Chief Minister's residence.

The strong feelings that marked their entry into the public discourse on the disaster are apparent in a selective sample of their songs provided below with translations and commentary. Translations are literal interpretation from Hindi to English. The commentary is based on interview responses to questions regarding the meaning of the march and individual verses. Each verse is cast either in the format of statement (question) and responses dialogue (Verse 1,2,4,6,7), or explanation of events (Verses 3 and 5). This reflects the discursive attitude of the marchers and their desire to be seen as 'having something to say' about the disaster.

Verse 1

Carbide Ne Kye Kiya
Hazaron Ko Mar Diya
Sarkar Ne Kya Kiya
Hathyaron Ka Sath Diya

Translation:

What did Carbide do; it murdered thousands of people;
What did the government do; it aided the murderers.

Commentary. Union Carbide is portrayed as a murderer (criminal) and the government as its accomplice. The blame for the tragedy (crime) is placed jointly on these two principal agents. The magnitude of their crime is described in the phrase 'hazaron ko mar diya', but is used colloquially to signify an undetermined very large quantity. Although the government at this point in time reported only about 1400 deaths, victims claimed that over 15,000 deaths had occurred and that the government and Union Carbide were attempting to cover up the real damages. The most important sentiment expressed by this verse was a categorical condemnation of both Union Carbide and the Government of India as partners in a crime. This close association of these seemingly disparate

agents, sounds surprising since several months later the Government of India sued Union Carbide on behalf of the victims. They pointed out the government's cozy relationship with Union Carbide facilities, as evidence of its irresponsible behavior.

Verse 2 Bhopal Ki Galian Suni Hain
Union Carbide Khooni Hai

(In a variation the second line is "Arjun Singh Khooni hai". Mr. Arjun Singh was the Chief Minister of the State of Madhya Pradesh).

Translation: The streets of Bhopal are deserted; (because) Union Carbide is a murderer (variation reads Arjun Singh is a murderer).

Commentary. People love the streets; they live on the streets. Deserted streets is a sign of calamity (often calamities in which loved ones are lost). The calamity here was not caused by natural disasters like floods, draughts, or earthquakes to which the public is accustomed. In the victims' view it was caused by murders perpetrated by Union Carbide (or Arjun Singh). Streets were deserted because Bhopal faced two major mass evacuations as a consequence of the disaster. The first one occurred immediately following the accident when over 300,000 people fled Bhopal in fear of the poisonous gas (Shrivastava 1987; **Times of India** 1984). The second evacuation occurred in the middle of December just prior to the "Operation Faith". This operation involved neutralization of about 20 Tons of MIC remaining in the plant. People were so afraid that they fled to other towns and government established refugee camps.

Verse 3 Dollar Ki Chal Ne
Zahar Ghola Bhopal Me
Zahar Banaya America Me
Bhej Diya Bhopal Me.

Translation: Moves (machination) by the Dollar (Americans); Mixed poison in Bhopal; Made the poison in America; and dumped it in Bhopal.

Commentary. The conflict between victims and Union Carbide is manifested as a conflict between Bhopal and America. Victims equated the interests of Union Carbide, the company, with those of the United States of America, its country of origin. America symbolized by the 'Dollar' (and implied materialistic values) is accused of plotting and scheming (making moves) for the sake of profits. Before the accident victims had vague image of America as a rich country where business and commerce thrived and served as the motive force of society. The accident concretized this image as one of crass commercialism. This verse accuses the philosophy of commercialism as being responsible for transferring poison made in America to Bhopal.

Verse 4 Gali Gali Me Shor Hai
Arjun Singh Chor Hai

Translation: There are proclamations in the streets; (that) Arjun Singh is a scoundrel (thief).

Commentary. Again streets, the hub of social life, are described as being awake with the sound of news--discovery that Arjun Singh is a thief. This accusation was based on local rumors that the Chief Minister Mr. Arjun Singh took money from Union Carbide to squash the incident, and that he stole money meant for relief operations. It should be noted that victims did not provide any evidence to ground these rumors. The accusation served as a convenient means of catharsis for the frustrations at inadequate medical and food relief. Victims suffered horrible deaths and some evidence indicates that many survivors were plagued by traumatic medical and psychological problems (Shrivastava 1987). They could not understand why better relief was not forthcoming. They blamed and accused the authorities, as a means of rationalizing what they saw as gross inadequacies in relief operations.

Verse 5 Saari Janata Gas Me
Arjun Singh 'Aes' Me

Translation: The public is in the gas (referring to MIC gas); while Arjun Singh is enjoying luxuries.

Note: The word 'Aes' (pr. Ass) was mispronounced. The correct version is the Urdu word 'Aish' (pr. Ash) which means 'enjoyment of luxuries'.

Commentary. This verse articulated a very basic sentiment of the victims, that political leaders were insensitive to the plight of poor people. They selfishly and conspicuously enjoyed life while the poor suffered. Arjun Singh, by virtue of being the state's Chief Minister, symbolically represented the elite political establishment in Bhopal. In this verse victims were reacting to claims that on hearing of gas leak, Mr. Arjun Singh actually fled the city to his luxurious 'country home' outside Bhopal, in fear of being poisoned by the gas. This claim was one of the charges being examined by the government established Judicial Inquiry Commission on the Bhopal tragedy. The Commission was discontinued a year later, before it could produce a report on the accident. Interviews with knowledgeable observers suggested that this charge was unfounded.

Verse 6

Doctoron Ne Kya Kiya
Hamko Dudh Nahin Diya
Vakilon Ne Kya Kiya
Hamko Payada Bana Diya

Translations: What did doctors do; they did not give us milk;
What did lawyers do; they used us as pawns.

Commentary. Doctors and lawyers are very highly respected members of the community. They are regarded as guardians of people's health and rights. Doctors are accused of denying victims the very essence of health-milk. Milk is a symbol of all that is healthful, good and life sustaining. Free milk was distributed to victims by government relief workers and by volunteer organizations. Due to disorganization and some distribution malpractices, some victims did not get milk.

Lawyers were accused of using victims as pawns in legal battles fought in U.S.A. They betrayed the trust that culture bestowed on them as educated, and honest guardians of people's rights. The main focus of this allegation was the American personal injury lawyers who descended on Bhopal following the accident to recruit victims as clients. Lawyers signed up victims even without interviewing them about the nature and extent of damages. Local newspapers carried advertisements with affidavit forms attached, which victims could sign and mail in, to hire lawyers to represent them. The utter callousness and insensitivity with which lawyers approached victims, made them feel exploited and used.

Verse 7

Arjun Singh Ek Kam Karo
Bhopal Talab me Doob Maro.

Translation: Arjun Singh, Listen, do one thing.
Go jump in the Bhopal lake and drown.

Commentary. This verse censures Mr. Arjun Singh for his role in the tragedy. The victims recommend that he drown himself in the Bhopal lake to atone for his shameful role. Suicide by drowning is associated with shamefully guilty offenders. By suggesting this mode of suicide the victims are emphasizing the shame attached to government's neglect of its responsibilities.

SOCIAL CONFLICTS

Study of these songs reveals several types of conflicts as perceived by victims. The first conflict was between victims and Union Carbide. Union Carbide, the owner of the plant, is accused of being a callous murderer, who in the pursuit of profits, polluted Bhopal. In the minds of victims there was no distinction between Union Carbide (I) Ltd and its parent company, Union Carbide Corporation. 'Union Carbide' was viewed as a single foreign entity responsible for the accident and consequent destruction of life.

The second conflict was between victims and the local government. The government, traditionally viewed as a protector or people and provider of services, was portrayed as a murder accomplice of Union Carbide. The head of the government, Mr. Arjun Singh, was accused of not doing enough to ameliorate the plight of victims. He was also ac-

cused of being a murderer and a thief. Hidden and implicit allusions were made to the government's misuse of relief food supplies and funds.

The third conflict was between Bhopal and the United States. Victims' geographical identities were rooted in Bhopal, not in India. They saw America as the aggressor in Bhopal. Because most victims were uneducated and many were illiterate, they did not distinguish between Union Carbide and America. Their conflict with Union Carbide was projected to America as a nation. Interestingly, even the author, a native of Bhopal for twenty-three years, was occasionally viewed with suspicion by victims because of his affiliation with an American university.

A fourth conflict apparent in these songs was the conflict between economic classes. The victims belonged to the lowest economic strata of society. They denounced everybody else, - relief workers, doctors, lawyers, government officials, the Chief Minister, and Union Carbide, who were all viewed as part of the ruling elite. Marchers wore badges saying 'Dhikkar Divas' (which means 'Denouncement Day') implying that the day was dedicated to denouncing the various agencies which were responsible for causing the accident and for not providing adequate relief.

Although the central theme running though these verses was one of anger and anguish, there were several paradoxical qualities to them. Verses were simultaneously specific and vague. They were simultaneously tragic and comic. They were simultaneously filled with pride and shame. They simultaneously revealed and mystified the true nature of the tragedy.

Specificity and vagueness were exemplified in verse #5 accused specific people like Mr. Arjun Singh, of vague crimes like living in luxury while Bhopal suffered the poison gas. The tragicomic nature of these verses was most apparent in verse #7. This verse delivered a surprise filled message to Mr. Arjun Singh that he should go and drown himself. The expression used in the song is normally used jokingly to tell someone to leave the premises. A close English equivalent may be the exhortation, "Go take a hike".

Pride and shame were reflected in a verse (not included in the sample) which claimed that victims were **demanding** their rights not **begging** for charity. They challenged the unstated presumption underlying

such demonstration marches, that marchers were making unjustified and undeserved demands. Authorities are typically leery of demonstrations because sometimes they turn violent. So very often authorities grant demands as a charitable act just to appease demonstrators. The marchers wanted to distinguish this demonstration (as a demonstration for their rights) from other (that may have been for unjustifiable demands). Pride in their current actions and a timidly shameful acknowledgement of past actions were simultaneously expressed in the verse.

The revealing - mystifying quality of these verses is perhaps most apparent in song #3. This is easily the most subtle and symbolic verse used in the demonstration. 'Dollar' symbolizes money, materialism, and commercialism that victims associated with Union Carbide and America. It alludes to 'mixing of poisons' and 'delivering it to Bhopal' in almost mythical terms, evoking images of intrigue and conspiracy common in local folk tales.

THE 'OFFICIAL' CONFLICT

Conflicts described above are important because they represent perceptions of victims, perhaps the key stakeholders in any industrial disaster. A significant feature of these conflicts was there contrasting difference from the 'official' version of the conflict, e.g., conflict perceived by the Government of India that claimed to represent victims' interests.

The Government of India saw the central issue as providing immediate relief to victims and procuring 'quick and fair compensation' for them. To protect victims interests from the commercial motives of private American and Indian lawyers, the government took on the responsibility of representing them in legal suits against Union Carbide. It passed an ordinance on February 20th, 1985 bestowing upon itself, rights to represent victims. The ordinance was passed into law in March 1985.

The Indian government thus institutionalized the conflict in the form of a legal battle between itself and Union Carbide. On April 16th, 1985, the first conference was convened in the Federal Court of New York Southern District, by Judge J.F.K. Keenan. The suits filed by victims'

private lawyers had no legal standing to represent the victims, and the Government became their sole representative.

CONCLUSION

In theory, governments in democratic societies5osedly represent the public's interest. In practice however, particularly in industrial disasters, the public may view its interests differently from the government. The victims of the Bhopal tragedy not only saw their interests differently, but in fact viewed their own government as an accomplice in causing the tragedy. This identifies the limits of democratic representativeness of social institutions in crisis situations, and opens up possibilities for political changes.

Grass roots organizations, because of their origins and closeness to people, are in a better position to articulate true interests of the public, than are social and governmental institutions. They can play a central role in disaster recovery by articulating the perspective of victims, and ensuring that recovery programs incorporate this perspective. Public debates over strategic issues related to industrial disasters hold out the possibility of genuine social control over technologies.

Very little is known about how conflicts emerge and how they get resolved in industrial disasters. The cultural analysis of the Bhopal tragedy provided here, is a first step towards understanding the complex conflicts that contextualize disasters. If conflicts are not identified and dealt with early, they escalate and cause further complications in an already difficult situation. Conflicts exacerbate consequences of disasters for victims.

Social policies dealing with hazardous technologies and related industrial accidents have a dual focus. The first is preventing accidents from occurring, and the second is containing their damaging consequences. This second focus is guided by policy makers' perceptions of the problems resulting from the accident. These perceptions are significantly different from those of victims that suffer accidents, as shown in the above analysis. Hence, societal responses often don't solve victims' problems. Understanding accidents from the victims' perspective, via cultural analysis, is one way of humanizing social responses to industrial disasters.

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