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## **TRANSCRIPTION OF SPEECH BY SATINATH SARANGI ON THE BHOPAL GAS LEAK DISASTER**

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I am sure all of you have heard about, read about or know about the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal which is the worst industrial disaster in history. I don't know how many of you know that it is still ongoing, that people are still dying. Over half a million people were exposed to toxic gases on a night almost 28 years ago. About one fifth are still battling with chronic illnesses of the lungs, of the brain, of the reproductive system, of the musculoskeletal system, of a host of mental health problems. And I am sure most of you do not know that there is another disaster that's also ongoing and that's the disaster caused by the reckless dumping of hazardous waste by the Union Carbide Corporation in and around the factory.

The Gas disaster killed about 25 thousand people and about 120-150 thousand people are still battling chronic illnesses and there are over sixty thousand people who have been chronically exposed to a cocktail of whole host of organochlorines, heavy metals and pesticides in their local ground water which has been the only source of drinking water for them. And there is also abundant evidence to show that it was due to deliberate acts of omission and commission by Union Carbide Corporation -which owned, designed and supervised the factory in Bhopal-that in fact these were not accidents. These were corporate crimes that continue to be perpetrated in Bhopal on the people there. And also there is abundant evidence to show that the Government of India and the state government which is the Government of Madhya Pradesh, actually have protected the business interests of these corporations over the interest of the people who elected them. And this has been irrespective of the political party in power that the government has all along helped the corporation. In fact the first response of the government to the Gas Disaster, was not telling people to run in the opposite direction of the wind, or to cover their noses and mouth with wet cloth, which would have protected them, may be thousands of people. The first response of the government was to rush with vehicles, lift dead bodies and dump them into the river and the forest to bring down the number of dead. And this continues. This act of complicity of the elected government continues to this day.

Now about the health concerns, if you see, right from the time of the disaster, in fact when the disaster was still occurring, when the gases were still leaking, thousands of people reached the one big government hospital that was there. There the doctors did not know what to do. They found the people breathless, coughing, moaning, groaning and dying right at the hospital doorstep. And so these doctors called up the plant medical officer and all he said was -this is just like a potent tear gas, just wash with water and it will go. Of course it was a lie. But this lie kept on getting repeated, including, by Jackson Browning who was the Director of Environmental Health (Vice President Health Safety & Environment Programs, UCC) in the company. Immediately after the disaster, what also started was, Union Carbide's downplaying of the consequences. It is interesting to know that Dr. Hans Wheel (Weil) - who was the doctor who (was) actually reprimanded by the US courts for fudging the X-Rays of Asbestos victims to show (as an expert testifying for Johns Manville) that asbestos did not cause any problem- came to Bhopal after the disaster to say that it was not such a problem, that people were improving one week after the disaster.

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The third thing is something people find most reprehensible when they hear it. Right after the disaster we had a German doctor from the Max Planck Institute for Toxicology- Dr Max Daunderer . He found that if you give intravenous sodium thiosulfate, it increases the thiocyanate content of your urine. Which means that sodium thiosulfate was somehow, detoxifying people's bodies. And in fact he recorded, and we also recorded that a significant improvement in the situation of the victims-they were eating better, they were breathing better, they were less fatigued. And yet Union Carbide actively stopped this drug from being administered through the Director –General of Health Services in the state who was the younger brother of Union Carbide's Security Chief . He circulated a note saying whichever doctor gives this drug has to defend himself/ herself because we don't know what this drug can do. The drug did nothing other than (providing) relief in symptoms.

The other unpardonable thing is withholding of information. We know that Union Carbide carried out studies on the effect of MIC (Methyl Isocyanide) gas on living systems at the Carnegie Mellon Institute at the University of Pittsburgh for 7-10 years. And yet it still continues to withhold medical information on the leaked gases claiming that these are trade secrets. As a result, as you can imagine, the doctors say, we don't know what gas it was? We don't know how to treat its effects on the body. So there has been rampant abuse of antibiotics, steroids and psychotropic drugs and pain killers over the years. Symptomatic treatment therefore has been the mainstay of medical response in the face of Union Carbide withholding medical information. I do not know how many of you know this, but the compensation that the Union Carbide paid was \$500 to 95% of the people exposed for lifelong injuries and \$2000 for every death that occurred. Given the fact that 72% of the people who were exposed were people who depended on hard physical labour for their livelihood, it meant starvation for thousands of families, because they got so little in compensation and they had borrowed so much for medical treatment.

Apart from withholding of medical information, there was also active suppression of information. In fact I was telling Dr. Lie that Union Carbide case is one unique case in which almost every single statement that you make, that could be seen as libellous, can be substantiated with internal corporate documents that we happen to have. And this document shows that in 1989 Union Carbide scientists, actually tested the ground water before actually anyone else did. They found that they could not get LD50 values through bioassay. They report that 'every dilution we try there was hundred per cent fish mortality' and yet this information was suppressed.

And lastly (and this is tricky and I can't go into much detail due to lack of time), after that disastrous settlement that Anand was talking about , the settlement which cost the company only 43 cents per share (talk about deterrent compensation), when this settlement was modified, Union Carbide was told by the court –you have to set up a hospital with 500 beds for long term treatment of people. At the same time, it reinstated the criminal charges, and as part of that when their property was confiscated, Union Carbide got the judge to dis-attach these confiscated shares. It used that to build the hospital. This hospital is now at the centre of (and Sarojini knows much more about it) drug trials; at least 13 drug trials were carried out by companies like Pfizer, Sanofi-Aventis, Astrazeneca on the Bhopal victims. So it continues. We feel the impunity that Union Carbide got after killing 25,000 people, possibly encouraged the drug companies saying what's a few more deaths, if people who committed all those crimes could get away, we could get away as well.

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So as I said the majority of the people who were affected were poor people. As it happens, I have done quite a bit of travelling and particularly to see toxic areas in other countries- in Europe and US; everywhere there is the same story; which is if you are poor, if you are non white, if you are somehow dispossessed of power, you find that you have a much greater risk of being exposed to environmental toxins. And this is the story repeated in Bhopal. As I said 72% were those who were dependent on hard physical labour. In effect losing their health meant starving and not being able to maintain your family.

The same story is with contaminated ground water, because it is this area that people migrated to, people who could not afford to pay rent thought they could settle there because the place was vacant, not knowing that the water that they were drinking was contaminated in this terrible way. But what is amazing is that, people who had hardly anything and people who had their physical powers impacted because of the extreme exposure and by exposure to ground water haven't stopped fighting; people fighting for their rights and fighting for what they need most. And in fact the Bhopal survivor's struggle is possibly the longest struggle of industrial victims anywhere in the world. And this has happened legally and extra-legally. In legal actions again, when the case was taken to US federal court, Union Carbide Corporation said we can't have it in the US courts because the disaster happened in India (because they are scared that the US courts will make them pay heavy damages. The Indian government's lawyer did argue that all the decisions that led to the disaster- the decision of cutting costs, the decision of building the factory with mild steel instead of stainless steel, the decision to shut down the refrigeration system which was stipulated in their own manuals to cut costs, to save something like \$35 a day were all taken in Union Carbide headquarters at Danbury, Connecticut. And that's why the US courts were the proper forum. But the US judge said no, it's the Indian court that it will go to and that's where (as Anand was telling), the settlement occurred.

So we tried to take our case to the International Court of Justice in Hague and we were told Sorry we don't deal with this, we don't deal with corporations, we only deal with matters brought by two different nations. If it was the Indian Government and the US Government we would have done it but sorry we can't do much. And what is interesting is that the same judge who gave the judgement on the settlement was promoted to the International Court of Justice, the same year that the deal was struck. And we know that Union Carbide had a role to play into getting that judge nominated and put into ICJ with a salary of one million dollars a year.

But as we are relating the actions by the survivors have included fasts, have included walks, twice walking from Bhopal to New Delhi, a distance of 750Km, marches, occupations, including occupying Union Carbide's office here in Delhi and sometimes campaign tours, sometimes tours to the US, UK, different parts of Asia. Sometimes pranks- I am told that some people stuck stickers in local trains in Bombay saying if you want to know whether you will have success in love or will go to foreign countries, have sons born to you, dial these numbers. And those numbers were not of astrologers but of Dow Chemicals and they had to change their visiting cards, I am told people did those things. But we did a lot of petitioning as well. We went to UN several times. We've petitioned to WHO, we've petitioned to UNEP, we met Mr Jose Ocampo in the New York office of the UN. He promised us a lot and took three month's time to decide what all he could deliver. We said that look there is UNEP that can at least assess the contamination in and around the factory, we approached ILO as large number of workers were involved, UNICEF as large number of children were involved. There was

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research that was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association and the Journal of Industrial Medicine that showed that children born to gas exposed parents after the disaster were also affected so we said do something for the children. We said there are specific bodies in the United Nations that can actually do a lot of good. And we were promised by Mr. Ocampo and nothing happened. We went to the Business and Human Rights section of the UNHCR, nothing happened. Promises were definitely made.

So what we find is, that in terms of challenges in terms of Global Governance there is one that is very key, and this even a child will understand, these transnational corporations, they operate everywhere and yet they are above the law of all these countries. There is no fora where transnational corporations can be held accountable for their continuing crimes. We don't have it. And the other problem we find is that international organisations like Red Cross rush when there is some natural disaster, when some act of god happens. But when there is some act of corporation they are nowhere. In the last 28 years none of these international organisations have actually said that here's something that we can do. Why? Because fingers will be pointed at named corporations and that's the reason why they have avoided. So this itself is a challenge. There are slow and silent Bhopals happening all over the country and all over the world in fact. If you look at the Global Chemical Report published by the UN and they say that among the top 5 causes of death, that due to chemical exposure is among the top five. And this is not just accidental exposures. Because if you take the occupational deaths of more than 2.1 million people (if you go by ILO data) or deaths due to environmental exposure or diseases because of environmental exposure, we are talking of a huge, continuing, all pervasive and ubiquitous but invisible corporate crimes. We do not have anything globally to hold corporations accountable.

We were also asked to talk about knowledge production and this is one area where I think this all can be seen most clearly. Right from the beginning the cause of disaster- right after the Union Carbide disaster, the corporation retained a consultancy Company called Arthur D. Little. And Arthur D. Little did their "research" then made a solid case that it was in fact a disgruntled worker who caused the disaster. And this story changed. The first story was not this. The first story was that a Union Carbide officer seems to have seen a poster in a Sikh temple somewhere in Punjab that the Punjabi Black September groups had caused this. The Black September story could not sell because they could not produce the poster. Then it was the disgruntled worker story, then they felt that may be that was too uncharitable to the community of workers so they said that may be the worker did not want to cause that disaster, he just mixed water into the tank and that ended up causing the disaster.

As for the government's scientific agencies like the ICMR- I was telling how the study on next generation children born to gas exposed parents, that study was prematurely terminated. In fact several studies were pre-maturely terminated because they were coming out with data that would have caused damage to Union Carbide Corporation and its owner the Dow Chemical Company. In the face of all that survivors and support organisations have carried out a lot of research and generated much data and published this data in international peer reviewed research journals. In fact I came here in the middle of an epidemiological study that we were carrying out. And this will be a pretty large study involving more than hundred thousand people from unexposed communities as well as people exposed to gas and contaminated ground water.

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The people of Bhopal and their supporters are committed to continue with this struggle till justice is done and the individuals and agencies responsible for the continuing disaster are punished in an exemplary manner.