



U^ont^o ^{uuuuu}us a child is b^ol^on

REPORT: FRANK CASTELLI

AS THESE WORDS ARE WRITTEN it's raining in the bastis of Bhopal. The rain comes as a relief, after the burning heat of summer. As the first drops hit, the air fills with the delicious scent of rain on dry ground, but for those who live here, the poorest of India's poor, in huts of sacks and planking, the rain will soon bring other smells.

The rain drips from trees and creepers in the grounds of Union Carbide's derelict and deserted factory. Gusts of rain blow into abandoned godowns and make a slurry of the powders that lie caked on the floors. White rivulets laden with poisons flow out of the open doors and soak into the earth.

Nine hundred yards to the east, Lilabai, her head covered against the rain, awaits her turn at the hand-pump, a tall cast-iron contraption painted a livid red. A notice warns that the water is toxic, not suitable for drinking, but there's no alternative.

Raising the pot onto her head for the long walk home, Ramsiya Bai passes the well which for years she and the other neighbourhood women had used. As their vessels plunged into the water dark rainbows would dance on the surface and up would come a smell like tar and drains and rot and things for which the women had no names. The water burned when they drank, but although it tasted bad. Unfortunately, the handpump water is just as unhealthy. Ramsiya drank it all the while she was expecting her son, Suraj, and while she was nursing him.

Ramsiya's house is like many others, a hovel built of whatever materials came to hand. In it you may detect the debris of a sub-civilisation, its walls include jute sacking, palm fronds, planks, beaten-flat cans, rubber tyres, frayed plastic sheets. It has but two rooms, one for sleeping in, whose plank walls have been desperately stuffed with cloth, paper, mud – anything that will keep out the weather. In the other room, lit by a single tiny window, is a clay hearth. Before this is a clean swept area of clay floor on which Ramsiya has made some designs in coloured powder. Other than for a few pots and tins, and a rail on which a few clothes are hanging, the room is empty.

She sets down the pot of water and looks for her son whom she'd left lying on a mat. A cry from outside finally leads her to Suraj, who is lying on his belly in the mud, clawing at a plant. Hearing his mother's exclamation he turns his head and rolls himself over

and over to her. He's soiled himself again.

Looking at Suraj's enormous, delighted grin, the mother's heart is filled with sadness. Her son is not a baby, or a toddler. He is ten years old. Other children his age go to school, play with their friends, but Suraj cannot stand or walk on paralysed legs that twist like twigs beneath him. He was born with brain damage. He cannot speak a word. All he can do is roll over and over and smile that brilliant smile.

IN DECEMBER 2006 the Chingari Trust, set up by Goldman Award winners Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla brought a team of doctors from Delhi to assess the problems of children in the Bhopal bastis where water is poisoned by the factory. What they found amazed them: processions of parents bringing children with cerebral palsy, deafness, eye problems, tumours, cleft lips and palates. Many had withered or malformed limbs. Some of the children could not speak, but lay helplessly in their mother's arms.

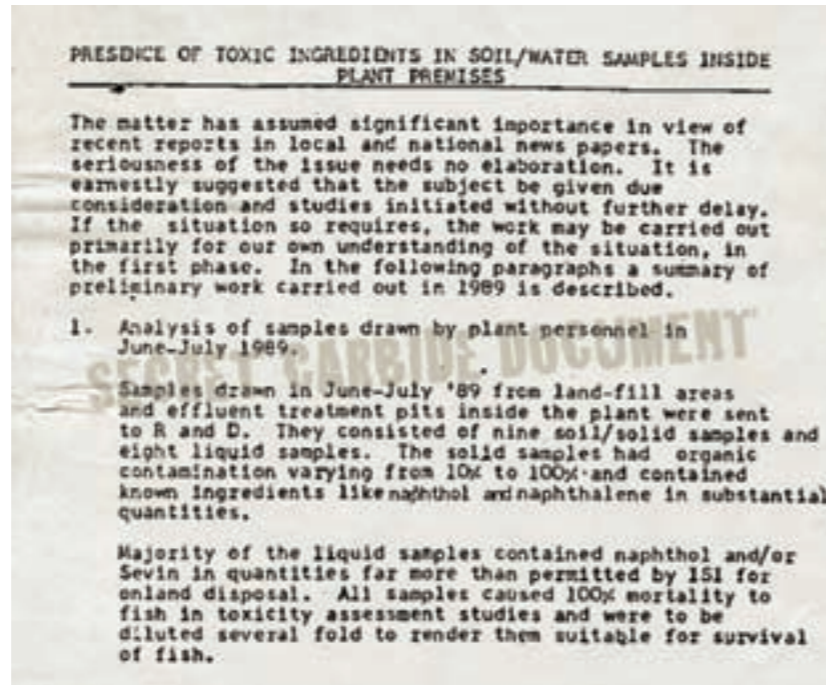
The children's parents had either been exposed to poison gas on the dreadful night of December 3, 1984, or else had drunk and washed in water poisoned by chemicals leaking from the factory. Some families had been poisoned first by the gases then again by the water.

BHAVESH, SAMBHAVNA'S DISPENSER, lives in Atal Ayub Nagar, a slim strip of housing sandwiched between Carbide's factory wall and the railway line. His family moved there when he was six. There were no hand-pumps and fetching water meant a trek to the well in Shakti Nagar, half a mile to the south.

To remedy this problem, the people of Atal Ayub Nagar clubbed together to install two handpumps – a decision that would soon return to haunt them.

At first the water seemed okay. Then oily globules began appearing in it – if allowed to settle they'd form a layer at the bottom of the glass. The water acquired a faint smell, which grew gradually worse. It tasted oilier too, but these changes happened very slowly.

Bhavesh's family were startled when his grandmother, on a visit from her village, pronounced the water undrinkable. 'It stinks!' she said. The locals, who'd by now been drinking it for years, didn't find it so bad. They had bigger things to worry about, like the growing number of damaged children being born to distraught mothers in their small community.



What the people of Atal Ayub Nagar didn't know, because no one had told them, was that the ground on the other side of the factory wall, yards from their houses, was severely contaminated by toxins. A private Union Carbide memo (*above*) never meant for publication, reports that samples of water taken inside the factory proved instantly fatal to fish. Fish died too, in water to which dry soil samples had been added. The causes? Naphthol (abdominal pain, convulsions, diarrhoea and vomiting) and naphthalene (anaemia, cataracts, retinal damage, liver and brain damage, possible cancer).

Carbide had known of the danger since 1989, the year Bhavesh's family became its neighbours, but it issued no warnings. Its bosses in India and the US watched silently as families already ruined by Carbide's gases drank, and bathed their kids in, poisoned water.

Worried community workers asked questions, but Carbide denied there was a problem and wrote to the authorities suggesting they take action to quash these troublemakers.

Rehana, 10, (*left*) lives near Bhavesh in Atal Ayub Nagar. She was born without a left thumb, her growth is retarded, her mind is weak and she hasn't the strength to go to school. Rehana's vision is not okay, she's plagued by rashes and is constantly breathless. Her dad sadly asks, 'Why was fate so cruel to our poor child?'



'I have never before seen such a high proportion of children born damaged as in this community.'

DOCTOR AT CHINGARI TRUST HEALTH CAMP

BEYOND THE FACTORY SITE, the monsoon fills two large lakes in which buffalos wallow and kids splash. Here and there brittle pieces of black plastic stick out of the soil. They look like bits of dustbin bag but are all that remain of the liner meant to contain thousands of tons of screamingly toxic chemical sludges dumped by Union Carbide in its Solar Evaporation Ponds, for that is what the lakes used to be.

The liner, installed in 1973, was meant to be renewed every two years, but was never renewed. It failed in its first year, when heavy rains sent poisoned water cascading through nearby fields and settlements. These places too have paid a terrible price for their proximity to Carbide's factory.

AMIR, THE BOY WHOSE FINGERS were fused, lives in Blue Moon Colony, on swampy ground between the toxic ponds and the railway line. In this place, many children are born with physical and mental defects and



Suraj is ten years old. He is unable to walk or speak.

virtually everyone is ill. The pesticide residues are everywhere.

At times, when the wind gets up, whirlwinds of chemical dust play in the alleys alongside the children.

Amir didn't used to like playing, because he hated being different. He would go around with a heavy frown to make himself look fierce and would hold his hands up and stare through them like a magician, as if to work a spell on anyone who dared tease him.

The Chingari Trust, which like the Sambhavna clinic, is supported by the Bhopal Medical Appeal, was set up specifically to help children suffering from disabilities. It organised a simple operation and Amir's fingers are now separated and healing well. There could hardly be a happier small boy on the planet.

Amir wants to thank all of you whose donations to the Bhopal Medical Appeal helped fund his operation. 'I've grown so used to practising dark looks,' he says. 'It's a habit. but now I am so happy to have good hands, I'll have to learn to smile.'



Amir is healed and says he will now start practising smiles