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From Flowers to Flames:
Motherhood, Identity, and Environmental Stewardship in Bhopal

INTRODUCTION

On December 2, 1984, a poisonous gas issuing from the nearby Union Carbide plant assaulted the residents of the Old City in Bhopal, India.[2] As the gas spread, people awoke unable to breathe properly and with a burning sensation in their eyes. Seeking relief, they poured into the streets, only to find that the air around them was thick with the gas.[3] Champa Devi Shukla remembers the disaster with resounding detail. She had lived in Bhopal for twelve years with her children, her husband, and his family before the disaster, but she was unaware of the neighboring Carbide plant. That night, she and her family were awakened by a shout: "Hurry up, get away from the house, otherwise you will all die!"[4] She ran with her husband and her five children outside into a nightmarish scene. Slum residents, those living closest to the plant, could hear the facility's managers over the speaker system advising calm and asking that everyone return to their homes. The gas, they said, would have no lasting impact.[5] Disregarding the mollifications, thousands of Bhopali residents stampeded in panic, struggling to stay conscious.[6] "Those who fell," Champa recounts, "lay on the ground, no one to pick them up."[7] In fear of joining them, she did what she could to protect her children and her husband.

[1] Mukherjee, Suroopa, Surviving Bhopal: Dancing bodies, written texts, and oral testimonials of women in the wake of an industrial disaster, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2010), 159-60.
[2] Chishti, Anees, *Dateline Bhopal: A newsman's diary of the gas disaster*, (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company 1986), 25. *Also see Appendix A for maps of Bhopal.*
[3] Ibid, 26.
[4] Chingari Trust Bhopal: Working with the survivors of the 1984 union carbide gas disaster. in Chingari Trust [database online], 2010, available from http://chingaritrustbhopal.blogspot.com/2010_12_01_archive.html.
[5] Chishti, 30.
[6] Ibid, 29.
[7] Chingari Trust Bhopal.

The methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas that escaped from the plant killed more than 12,000 people in the immediate aftermath and maimed as many as 600,000 in years to come.[8] Most long lasting of the gas's impact was the damage the MIC inflicted upon women's reproductive systems, begetting a second generation of victims who would suffer from birth defects and deficiencies.[9] A legal battle began just days after the disaster itself, first against the American parent company, then against its subsidiary Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL). Relief was slow and incomplete, hospitals and shelters slow to respond. The Indian government and its agencies did not have the tools or resources to respond adequately. Twenty-five years later, true relief has yet to reach the victims of the disaster.

Over the course of four years, Champa's husband was diagnosed with advanced cancer, two of her older sons died, her daughter was paralyzed, and her two remaining children continually suffered from lung and brain injuries.[10] Struggling to provide for her family without her husband's income, she began as an employee in office stationery production in 1986, along with a hundred other women. The production center was one of many operations that the Indian government established to respond to Bhopal's lack of employment.[11] Three months into the work, Champa recounts, their managers informed them that the training period had ended and that they could now produce and sell stationery on their own and from their homes—rather than continue to provide them employment as promised.[12] Without any true source of income on which to support their families, the women at the center began to communicate with each other and started organizing the next day. Out of their shared need, they created the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationery Karmchari Sangh (commonly referred to as the Stationery Union), a vibrant

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[8] Chishti, 27.
[9] Sarangi, Satinath, "The movement in Bhopal and its lessons," *Social Justice* 23:4 (Winter 1996), 316.
[10] Chingari Trust Bhopal.
[11] Mukherjee, 114.
[12] Ibid.

organization still active today.[13] Their organization seeks relief and political power for

survivors, demanding that Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) and the Indian government provide

for the people of Bhopal who still suffer the costs of industrial irresponsibility. The Stationery

Union is one of two fully and continuously active women's organizations in Bhopal fighting for

political, economic, and environmental rights for the city and its affected population. The

Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (briefly, Sangathan) is a similar organization, both

originating as labor movements and growing with intensity as the women became more and more

discontented with the negligence of both government and corporation. With the use of

nonviolent protest methods, the women operating in the movement fight against environmental

apathy, chemical imperialism, and market globalization. They have become environmental

stewards to Bhopal and to India.

Champa Devi Shukla was not a feminist, nor was she an environmentalist. She was not

instructed in nonviolent protest methods, she did not know the chemical properties of the

poisonous gas, and she had not been part of any social movement in her life. Rather, Champa

was a wife and a mother. Despite such a domestic existence, Champa became one of the leaders

of the Stationery Union shortly after its inception. She organized the Stationery Union into a

national and international political entity, and through her actions and choices, she became an

environmental advocate for Bhopal.

How and why did these women organize in such numbers without any precedent for

women's activism, access to the public domain, education, or widespread support? Mapping out

the full process by which women in a traditional culture become empowered political actors

could prove impossible, and such a comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Using the Bhopal disaster as a case study for social upheaval following disaster, I focus instead

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[13] Ibid., 113-6.

upon a single and important aspect of this larger process: the disaster provoked social change

because the gas leak violently disrupted women's ability to fulfill their social role of

motherhood. Many Bhopali women, like Champa, lost much of their family to the disaster, and

more still suffered injury to their reproductive systems, resulting in sterility, spontaneous

abortions, and infants born with disabilities and impairments. The stories of the women involved

in the movement show that before the disaster, their lives were highly private, many of them

leading a domestic life governed by the *purdah* system (the concealment of women behind veils

and behind the walls of their homes). When their families became gas-affected refugees, their

husbands unemployed, their children dead and dying, and the women themselves unable to bear

healthy babies, the women of Bhopal had to find new ways of existing within Indian society.

Many women found employment outside the home, a drastic change compared to their domestic

work and piecemeal homemade production. This provided them with greater financial

independence, even while most of a family's finances were still controlled by their male leaders.

From their participation in the labor force, they found a collective identity with the other women

working next to them, which had never been available to them before. With surprising agility,

they became avid protestors, learning ways to use their bodies and their voices to make others

listen and employing nonviolent protest methods. Their new public visibility meant that in many

ways their domestic identity was threatened. They had to negotiate between taking care of their

families, feeding them with the money they made, fighting for their family's rights as protestors,

and dedicating themselves to the movement.   Their political and domestic identities were rarely

compatible, resulting in an amalgamated identity comprising their religious, familial, and

political obligations.

     The various transitions to women's lives were vitally important to Bhopal's future

because mothers and motherhood were exceptionally essential to the functioning of Indian society. The meanings of motherhood in India are integrated into religion, politics, employment, and household structure. Women express their citizenship in traditional Indian society through their role as mothers, their patriotism measured by the success and survival of their (male) children.[14] When the disaster so displaced their role as mothers, women were able to shape their temporarily malleable roles in an otherwise traditional culture. The roles that they now fill is very different from that which characterized their lives before the disaster, but they still express their nationalism and their citizenship by ensuring the safety of future generations and the physical environment that would support their survival. They transformed from private mothers, constrained by domesticity and traditional family practices, into public mothers, the outspoken and politically fluent symbols of India's nationalism.

Analyzing these social transformations in the context of Bhopal and the Bhopal disaster can provide valuable insight into the social processes that follow the upheaval of a disaster. One possible analysis of women's movements stems from ecofeminist philosophy, which seeks to understand the interplay between gender and human-environment relationships. Various women's environmental movements seem to lend themselves to ecofeminist analysis, simply because women shape the goals and articulate the motives of these movements. Overwhelmingly often, the women involved in such environmental movements are not self-professed ecofeminists, even if they engage in discourses involving gender and environmentalism. Because they do not organize around the specific theories and arguments of ecofeminism, their actual motives and objectives are often much more intricate and indefinite. A traditional ecofeminist analysis of women's movements oversimplifies the true complexity of

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[14] Banerjee, Sikata, "Armed masculinity, Hindu nationalism, and female political participation in India: Heroic mothers, chaste wives and celibate warriors" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8:1 (March 2006), 63.

women's activism. Ecofeminists understand women's movements as a manifestation of their intrinsic connection and concern for nature. These strains of traditional ecofeminism place women in a passive role, acting as a result of their femaleness and seeing that reflected back to them in the natural world.

I see great potential in ecofeminist analysis in circumstances like those that characterize the Bhopal movement. In many ways, ecofeminists analyze the world in order to imagine—and eventually realize—an ideal paradigm. However, traditional ecofeminist analysis does not challenge essentialist social structures, but rather perpetuates them by taking for granted that womanhood and motherhood are identities derived from the female body, rather than from cultural interpretations of the female body. Through a careful analysis of India's social spaces and the experiences of those people integral to the Bhopal women's movement, I seek to complicate traditional ecofeminism and question the origins and meanings of womanhood and motherhood in the context of Bhopal, thereby contributing to a non-essentialist ecofeminist discourse. Although India and specifically the Bhopal disaster are distinct social situations, gender structure and patriarchal visions of the female body are significantly ubiquitous. By analyzing Bhopal from the perspective of a revised, refined ecofeminism, Bhopal as a case study can specify human subjects in an often disembodied philosophy.

Disasters are deceptively fleeting: a unit of time when something monumental happens, before which society is in a state of normalcy and after which society recovers and returns to a new stagnation. On the ground, however, disasters are not moments in history, but events which give rise to a new social shape, and they exist within a number of contexts. In my analysis of the Bhopal disaster, I attempt to situate that one day in a variety of contexts: the progress of industrialization in the state and in the city of Bhopal; globalization into developing countries,

chemicalization, and chemical imperialism; gender culture in India; the Bhopal movement; and

the transformation of women's roles in India. Each context lends itself to a fuller understanding

of Bhopal's true reality, which in turn provides an example through which to rearticulate

ecofeminism. By analyzing the disaster in these contexts, it becomes clear that disasters are

moments of cultural upheaval and reorganization, instances in history that can change the

progression of society. These turning points provide strange opportunities for those

marginalized populations to override the mechanisms that keep them from gaining power and

position.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: ECOFEMINISM

The concern that women in Bhopal have expressed toward environmental pollution and

degradation is by no means unique to Bhopal. Women all over the world have begun specialized

movements to combat ecosystem damage, often focused on some aspect of damage that affects

their lives and their daily routine more so than the lives of their male family and community

members. Common among these campaigns is demand for water security, because women are

often responsible for the duties that require water most, such as growing food and feeding and

washing the family.[15] Women are also disproportionately responsible for children's health, so if

water contamination is threatening a community, they are often the first to see its effects.

These responsibilities, however, which inform women on the importance of water

security, are not those of women, but of mothers. It is mothers who are charged with taking care

of the children, and mothers happen to be women in almost every case. Water security is only

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[15] Rogers, Richard A., and Julie Kalil Schutten,. The gender of water and the pleasure of alienation: A critical analysis of visiting Hoover Dam, *The Communication Review* 2004 (7), 261; Rogers and Schutten argue that water politics is intimately linked to power relationships. They use Hoover Dam as an example of the ultimate control of *men* and male forms of reason over nature. They point to water politics as the culmination of the othering of women and nature simultaneously.

one example; however, it shows that *mothers* are sensitive to water security, but that women in general are not. And while women who do not have children often take issue with similar problems, "motherhood" is more pervasive than simply women who have children. That is, within many—if not most—societies, women at every stage of their lives are perceived as mothers-in-training, active mothers, failed mothers, or past mothers. These social constructions are evident in traditional Indian culture, as well as American society and many western cultures. (Social roles, of course, are forever evolving, and within these cultures women may begin to fill an identity independent of motherhood, but such innovations have not yet taken hold on a collective scale.)

The philosophy of ecofeminism has its own theories of the social and biological relationship between the female body and environmental health and security. Central to the philosophy is the idea that the patriarchy dominates nature and oppresses women using the same mechanisms, and neither environmental protection nor social equality can be reached independently. Like any field, theories on ecofeminism are as diverse as their authors, and as the field develops, these theorists, activists, and spiritualists represent new pluralities and subtleties within ecofeminism. Even so, a traditional, popular ecofeminism persists, within which theorists perpetuate essentialist notions of womanhood, motherhood, and environmental concern. Interestingly, this popular version of ecofeminism at times directly contradicts contemporary—or third-wave—feminism.

Traditional Ecofeminism and the "Earth Mother"

Ecofeminists aim to critique patriarchal industrial culture for its manipulation and exploitation of women's bodies and the Mother Earth. The philosophy, first articulated by

Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, reflects upon the connections between gender inequity and environmental degradation, both the sad results of a capitalist patriarchal society in its decline.[16] As western patriarchal culture continues to exploit natural resources, patriarchs deny equal access to resources, and through resources, power. Men's control over the environment cements their political and economic control over women, who do not wield the same control.

Ecofeminists touting a popular ecofeminism often describe women as vessels through which life flows, an expression of nature-based religion for which the Goddess or Gaia is central. Ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak, for instance, describes the "sacred link between the Goddess in her many guises and totemic animals and plants, sacred groves, and womblike caves, in the moon-rhythm blood of menses, the ecstatic dance—the experience of *knowing* Gaia, her voluptuous contours and fertile plains, her flowing waters that give life, her animal teachers."[17] Spretnak represents a spiritual ecofeminism based on the relationship between nature and the female body, the womb, the "voluptuous contours," the bleeding cycle. Spiritual ecofeminists, concerned with the perpetuation of the earth in its entirety, use language asserting that *all* women find themselves in the femaleness of nature and assume a universality of the mother earth. They thereby include all distinct cultures and those of developing countries in broad sweeping claims with little cultural sensitivity.

Ecofeminists are especially concerned with procreation rights and the ways in which a patriarchal society dictates how a woman's body is used.[18] "d'Eaubonne writes, for instance, "The first relationship between ecology and the liberation of women is the reclamation by

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[16] d'Eaubonne, Francoise, "What could an ecofeminist society be?" Ethics & the Environment 4:2 (1999).

[17] Spretnak, Charlene, Ecofeminism: Our roots and flowering. In *Reweaving the world: The emergence of ecofeminism.*, 1990 eds. Irene Diamond, Gloria Feman Orenstein, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books), 5.

[18] Stearney, Lynn M, Feminism, ecofeminism, and the maternal archetype: Motherhood as a feminine universal, *Communication Quarterly* 42 (2) (Spring 1994), 146.

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women of population growth, defining the reappropriation of the body."[19] As long as patriarchs

hold power, they control women's bodies just as they control the earth's capacities. Specifically,

ecofeminists draw from Marxist feminism, which tells us that women serve the important

purpose in an industrial society of replenishing the workforce every day and for each new

generation. Marxist feminism seeks to address class divisions along gender lines, a hierarchy

that traditional Marxism neglects to criticize. This philosophy describes the ways that women's

bodies serve a specific economic purpose and that the success of an industrial society relies upon

the perpetuation of women's roles as mothers. Conversely, women as procreators must be

controlled in circumstances of overpopulation, again to serve economic and political purposes.

Population control is another way that patriarchs dictate the use and abuse of women's bodies,

determining how many people should enter the world depending on various economic schemes.

Because men set the rate of that growth to provide for an industrial society, the patriarchy

ultimately transforms women's ability to procreate into society's ability to pollute.

     While ecofeminism and its ideological cousin Marxist feminism condemn the control of

women's bodies and promote women's self-determination over the use of their bodies, the line of

inquiry stops there. Ecofeminism must take the next step by challenging the concept that the

female body is a utility for society and realize that the meanings attributed to a woman's body

arose in specific social contexts when it benefited society to define them as procreators. An

ecofeminist utopia will remain incomplete until the ideology is reconciled with contemporary

feminism and social constructivism.

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[19] Ibid., 179.

The Contemporary Evolution of Ecofeminism

Despite the limiting origins of ecofeminist philosophy, developments to ecofeminism have raised new and revolutionizing ideas to the field. Specifically, ecofeminists Val Plumwood and Lynn Stearney have found new ways to understand ecofeminism within a modern feminist context. Plumwood and Stearney identify many of the same problematic aspects of ecofeminism that I have already pointed to. Plumwood seeks to develop an ecofeminism in keeping with feminist theory, within which nature provides a further component of inequality beyond a race-class-gender discourse.[20] Stearney focuses specifically on mothers and ecofeminism, arguing that ecofeminism misuses the mother identity.[21]

Interestingly, many feminists attempt to dispel the myth that every woman is maternal and that if they are predisposed against motherhood they are denying a part of themselves. Ecofeminism, although an ideological descendent of feminism, did little to break out of the social script of motherhood in its early days. The concept of maternal instinct that is so central to ecofeminism is, from a feminist perspective, a social phenomenon resulting from women's constructed identity through religion, education, and family structure. Plumwood identifies this breakdown between feminism and ecofeminism, writing, "Many feminists regard with some suspicion the view expressed by a growing number of women who describe themselves as 'ecofeminists'… The very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting, summoning up images of women as earth mothers, as passive, reproductive animals."[22] Even so, many strains of ecofeminism do not conceptualize women as reproductive animals, and feminism is not so limited as to completely ignore women's ability to

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[20] Plumwood, "Nature, self, and gender: Feminism, environmental philosophy, and the critique of rationalism," *Hypatia* 6 (1) (Spring 1991), 3.
[21] Stearney, 145.
[22] Plumwood, "Nature, self, and gender: Feminism, environmental philosophy, and the critique of rationalism," 20.

procreate. In finding a comprehensive form of ecofeminism, both feminism and ecofeminism must yield some of their absolutes to reach an ideological conclusion. Plumwood and Stearney both seek to breach this gap.

Plumwood analyzes the masculine origins of rationality and how that sense of rationality determines the way that humans relate to nature. "Nature," she writes, "as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilized, the nonhuman world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness."[23] Humans, then, attempt to rationalize this variegated sense of nature. Rationalizing nature, however, is a strictly masculine act, because rationality has been determined a masculine trait and has from its inception been defined by men. For Plumwood, ecofeminism is the alternative to this limited perspective for organizing nature.

The female image of nature and the figure of Gaia solidify women's purpose as mothers and caretakers. Plumwood writes, "If the model of nature is one of motherhood, it is the patriarchal conception of motherhood which has been, and mostly continues to be invoked, the conception of the mother as one who provides without cease; whose needs, if they exist at all, always come second; whose value is determined by the child she produces."[24] The Gaia that has been made prominent by popular feminism, Plumwood argues, could ideally personify a relationship between human reason and natural systems, but the image of "Gaia-as-mother…seems to be designed to reassure us that the earth really is a small and compassable object, easily manipulated and controlled through technology."[25] In place of the problematic

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Plumwood, Val, 1992. "Conversations with Gaia," *in Living with Contradictions: Controversies in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar (Westview Press, Inc.; Boulder, CO 1994), 668.

[25] Ibid., 669.

Gaia, Plumwood emphasizes the importance of multiple models of personified nature, its very variability denying definition and contextualization within any hierarchical system.[26] This, Plumwood argues, would give greater agency both to the natural world no longer controlled by agents of a patriarchy and to the woman, who would be defined beyond their bodily ability to be a resource and form of subsistence.

A traditional ecofeminist version of a perfect society has women in full control of their reproductive rights—which is as it should be, but ecofeminists are inconsistent in misconstruing that motherhood is a social prescription rather than a biological necessity. Stearney works to delineate how the female identity became that of the mother and how this qualifies the ecofeminist movement and the concept of 'mother earth.' Stearney writes, "One of the central metaphors of the ecofeminist movement is the use of motherhood to characterize women's unique capacity to care for and nurture the Earth. As such, ecofeminist rhetoric employs motherhood as a rhetorical universal, or archetype, that functions as a unifying foundation to link discrete symbolic acts."[27] The motherhood archetype, as she calls it, is the antithesis of the multiplicities of feminism. In this context, motherhood adopted a broader meaning, beyond bearing and raising children: a "social relationship that is characterized by emotional intensity, selflessness, nurturing, and protection."[28] While men were morally corruptible and capable only of a harsher, disciplinary love, women began to fill a softer role, which lent itself to an environmental compassion.

The motherhood identity, Stearney shows, is especially powerful for its cross-cultural application, an easy target for early feminism and the basis for the second-wave sisterhood that was so problematic. Definitions of western motherhood have "characterized women's supposed

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[26] Ibid., 671.
[27] Stearney, 145.
[28] Ibid., 147.

instinct for caretaking and nurturance as essentially a natural phenomenon, and encompassing the female psychological aptitude for limitless love and self-sacrifice."[29] The self-sacrifice that Stearney identifies as an inherently feminine characteristic assumes that women feel a sense of duty to the next generation, which lends itself easily to environmental advocacy.

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Ecofeminism holds great potential as a leading ideology for both feminism and environmentalism that it should not be limited to deterministic interpretations of gender. Both Plumwood's and Stearney's analyses contribute to a nuanced ecofeminism, one which can complicate essentialist notions of *woman* and *nature*. I build upon their work in search of an ecofeminism reflective of third-wave feminism. My own contributions to this doctrine will come from using the Bhopal women's movement as a case study. A nuanced ecofeminism also provides new insights into the Bhopal movement and its far-reaching effects, insights which can be applied to future disasters in order to understand the interplay of gender in disaster sociology.

THE DISASTER AND BHOPAL'S RESPONSE

The Bhopal disaster is in many ways only the tip of the iceberg, first as the culmination of a long history of corporate abuse and hazardous industrial practices, and later as the inception of a multi-generational social movement that has broadened far beyond the disaster itself. The international community has forgotten both of these larger contexts. The long-lasting effects of this disaster are in part a result of the extreme toxicity of the gas methyl isocyanate (MIC), but they are also a result of the lack of infrastructure in India for such disasters.[30] India's coping capabilities were too weak to support its people after such a disaster, evident in its systemic lack

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Abraham, C. M., and Sushila Abraham, "The Bhopal case and the development of environmental law in India" *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 40 :2 (April 1991).

of accountability, the delays at every step of the legal process, and the government's inability to provide resources for the survivors. These circumstances necessitated the rise of the Bhopal movement and the dedication if its supporters.

Contextualizing the Disaster

The twentieth century saw drastic changes in India, as the country and its citizens were immersed in global politics and commerce. The country's industrial and ecological scenes shifted to accommodate the clash of modernity and traditional markets. The government made it a high priority to incorporate global business ventures into its domestic economy, welcoming transnational industries like Union Carbide Corporation (UCC).[31] UCC, an American-based company, started a subsidiary with the cooperation of the Indian Government in 1933, under the name Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL). UCIL built one of its first plants in Bhopal, which later became the capital of Madhya Pradesh.[32]

The Bhopal disaster is an instance of international environmental injustice. Large industrial corporations such as UCC spread into underdeveloped countries like India because they boasted a cheap labor market and no regulations to limit good business.[33] Activists looking to prove corporate accountability claim that Union Carbide, as an American corporation, is

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[31] Ibid., 335.

[32] Sarangi, Satinath, "The movement in Bhopal and its lessons" *Social Justice* 23:4 (Winter 1996).

[33] Bullard, Robert, "Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement," in *Debating the Earth: The Environmental Politics Reader*, ed. John S. Dryzek and David Schlosberg (New York: Oxford University Press 1993), 471; World Bank economist Lawrence Summers famously voiced this profit-based perspective, as he showed the true colors of corporate behavior in 1991, seven years after the Bhopal spill. (*See* Memorandum from Lawrence H. Summers to Distribution, *GEP* (Dec. 12, 1991.) In a memorandum that was leaked to the press, he wrote, "A given amount of health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is *impeccable* and we should face up to that." The shrewd business sense that Summers describes here, and which is surely reflected in most corporate management, appraises human life depending on factors such as the income, political power, and stability of the nation to which they are citizens. Such "business sense" is evident in UCC's methods of corporate expansion and overseas manufacturing. This valuation of human capital creates a hierarchy of humans that is all at once xenophobic, racist, and classist.

partially or entirely at fault for the 600,000 victims of the gas leak, more so than its subsidiary UCIL. Environmental sociologist Robert Bullard, expanding upon the concept of environmental justice, describes the process of profiting off of a lack of infrastructure as "toxic colonialism."[34] Toxic colonialism is a function of international capitalism by which corporations profit-maximize by exporting toxins and the production of chemicals to less developed countries.[35] Bullard's term carries with it a long history of colonialism from western, developed countries into developing countries, a most poignant context for India, specifically.

In countries like India, it is substantially cheaper to dispose of toxic waste, wages are lower, and fewer restrictions apply. Bullard claims that corporations are fully aware of the risks of such business decisions, but take them anyway. Similarly, economist Wil Lepkowski concentrates on the process of "chemicalization," which he defines as the process by which developing countries rise up in the world by incorporating chemical manufacturing plants into their economies.[36] Although UCC was an American corporation, Lepkowski emphasizes that most plants in the third world originate from domestic interests rather than transnational corporate interests.[37] Through this lens, the Indian government was responsible for accepting UCC's business into their domestic economy and therefore accountable for what transpired as a result of that business venture.

Even within the city, the plant's geographical situation raises questions of inequality and environmental justice. The UCIL plant was built in the middle of the Old City, in the north of Bhopal.[38] Bhopal's three distinct areas, the Old City, the New City, and the industrial district,

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Lepkowski, Wil, "The disaster at Bhopal: Chemical safety in the third world." In *Multinational corporations, environment, and the third world*, ed. Charles S. Pearson, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1987), 240
[37] Ibid., 241.
[38] Sarangi, "The movement in Bhopal and its lessons."

are virtually independent cities.[39] The Old City was, and continues to be, the least developed

sector of Bhopal. Though modern city planners built up the other areas to create financial and

industrial districts, many residents of the Old City live in slum dwellings, which arose around the

UCIL plant after its development.[40] The roughly 100,000 residents living in the slums in 1984

were the first to suffer the impact of the poisonous gas, and their injuries were the most severe.[41]

The geography of poverty in Bhopal guaranteed that the gas affected certain residents more

severely than others. In 1984, the slum residents were predominantly immigrants from

surrounding areas who had been displaced from their agricultural land.[42] The UCIL plant

employed many of the residents; others worked as laborers in nearby warehouses, building

machinery and automobile parts.[43]

     The UCIL plant began using MIC, a main component of many major pesticides, in 1979,

only five years before the leak.[44] Employees in the plant worked generally without information

about the specific chemicals they handled, nor was the greater population given information in

the event of danger.[45] Turnover in Bhopal and specifically at the UCIL plant was very high,

which further exacerbated the issue of inexperience and lack of technical knowledge. UCC had

begun the process of shutting down the UCIL facility due to inadequate profits beginning in

1983, and because of this the safety precautions built into the plant had all been turned off, the

MIC in storage and presumably safe from catastrophe.[46] These conditions allowed for the

cataclysmic disaster, which would have been far less fatal had the UCIL plant been operational

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[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Holtz, Timothy, "Tragedy Without End: The 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster" In *Dying for growth: Global inequality and the health of the poor*, ed. Kim, Jim Yong, et. al. (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press 2000).
[42] Sarangi, "The movement in Bhopal and its lessons;" *see also Appendix A.*
[43] Mukherjee, 89.
[44] Scandrett, , Eurig, et al., eds., *Bhopal survivors speak: Emergent voices from a people's movement* from the Bhopal Survivor's Movement Study 2009. (Edinburgh: WP Books 2009), 118.
[45] Mukherjee, 14.
[46] Chishti, 25.

and secure.

Health Implications of the Gas Leak

Amongst reporters, government officials, and activists, there has been little agreement as to the extent of the damage caused by the gas leak. Estimates of how many people the gas affected range from 100,000 to 600,000 depending on who reports, and fatality reports range anywhere from 1,000 to 30,000. The victims first experienced burning in their eyes and throat, then in the next hours a debilitating fatigue and physical weakness, dizziness, and nausea.[47] While preliminary research on the human health effects of MIC showed that MIC was too radioactive to penetrate organs, the toxicology reports and autopsies show that MIC could cause extensive damage to organs, especially the lungs, stomach, brain, and reproductive system.[48] On the fifteenth anniversary of the disaster, the Bhopal Medical Appeal summarized the disaster's health implications as follows: "The horror of the disaster has been succeeded by the longest and largest medical disaster ever. Official statistics show that far more Bhopalis have died from gas-related illnesses in the 15 and a half years since the leak than died in the first week. In 1997 alone 1,185 people died. An estimated 120,000 people continue to suffer huge physical and mental agony from chronic illnesses."[49]

Reproductive health and the suffering of Bhopali women were especially severe.[50] Almost 3,000 women were pregnant when they were exposed to the MIC.[51] Toxicologist D.R.

[47] Claire, Marie., "We are not flowers, we are flames" in International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal [database online],2000, available from http://www.bhopal.net/oldsite/Marieclaire.html.
[48] Varma, D. R. "Epidemiological and experimental studies on the effects of methyl isocyanate on the course of pregnancy," *Environmental Health Perspectives* 72 (June1987), 153.
[49] Claire.
[50] Varma, D.R. "The Bhopal accident and methyl isocyanate toxicity" *Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health* 40:4 (December 1993), 516.
[51] Bhandari, N. R., et al. "Pregnancy outcome in women exposed to toxic gas at Bhopal," *The Indian Journal of Medical Research* 92 (February 1990), 29.

Varma, one of the leading researchers in MIC toxicology in Bhopal, writes, "In subsequent months, reports of an increase in stillbirths, spontaneous abortions, fetal abnormalities, and infant mortality appeared in survey findings, press interviews, and conference proceedings."[52] Various officials and non-governmental organizations have conducted a series of medical studies to ascertain the reproductive toxicity of MIC. One such study, published by Varma and Ian Guest in 1993, found that "of the 865 women [studied] who were in various stages of pregnancy at the time of exposure, 379 (44%) did not give birth to live babies."[53] V.K. Vijayan also conducted a study focusing on the women's reproductive system rather than the outcome of their pregnancies.[54] He found that, "In a study of 114 exposed and 104 control subjects, it was reported that leucorrhoea, pelvic inflammatory disorder, cervical erosion/endocervicitis, excess menstrual bleeding since exposure and suppression of lactation were significantly high in gas-exposed subjects."[55] Only one study had been conducted before the disaster by testing the chemical on mice, and other such studies on various types of animals have been conducted since then. Among these studies, the researchers found that MIC exposure caused skeletal deformities in the fetuses of mice and rats and decreased fertility.[56] However, as many studies were conducted years after the disaster, their findings are likely understated and would have been more severe had they been conducted immediately after the disaster.

The city was handicapped in addressing these threats to women's reproductive health because of the stigma associated with women's bodies and their sexuality.[57] The Sambhavna Clinic currently provides the only gynecological center in Bhopal to address the damages to

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[52] Ibid., 153.
[53] Varma, "The Bhopal accident and methyl isocyanate toxicity," 522.
[54] Vijayan, V., "Methyl isocyanate (MIC) exposure and its consequences on human health at Bhopal" *The International Journal of Environmental Studies* 67:5 (Oct 2010), 537.
[55] Ibid., 547.
[56] Varma, "The Bhopal accident and methyl isocyanate toxicity," 522.
[57] Mukherjee, 119.

women's reproductive systems, and gynecologists and birth specialists have moved into Bhopal to provide the medical support needed.[58] Satinath Sarangi is one of the most active organizers in Bhopal and is responsible for founding the Sambhavna Clinic. He writes, "Sambhavna grew out of the gloom caused due to the failure of the dominant system of health care of the Bhopal survivors. One of the big gaps in research and medical care that we identified was women's health. The dominant system of health care for Bhopal survivors left out research on gynaecological impact altogether."[59] However, these additions to the medical community were late in coming, and women did not receive health care for years before their arrival. Even with their expertise and the privacy they provide to their patients, many women do not seek help because of the same taboos. Much of these stigmas stem from Islam and Hinduism, the system of women's concealment known as *purdah*, and the individual familial structures each woman lived in.[60]

Interestingly, women's health care in India has consisted primarily of health care for mothers. Sarangi illuminates this point, writing, "Obstetric care [women being seen only as child producers] is still the dominant if not only area of health care, at the Bhopal memorial hospital too there is no department of gynaecology."[61] From a health perspective, then, women's bodies need special care for their ability to bear children. The Sambhavna Clinic provides the only center for gynecology. The Clinic also promotes "education, skill sharing and mobilizing among health volunteers" for the women of Bhopal.

The most long-lasting effects of the poison were not even limited to those present for the gas leak. Twenty-five years later, there is now a second generation of gas victims comprising the

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[58] Ibid., 195.
[59] Sarangi, Satinath, "Bhopal research," *Personal communication received by Tehya Wood, 15 March 2011.*
[60] *See pg. 20 for details.*
[61] Ibid.

children of directly exposed Bhopali women. Currently, more than 300 children are registered with the Chingari Trust, a clinic that provides cultural immersion support and medical aid to afflicted children. The intergenerational signs of the Bhopal disaster make it impossible for the city's population to forget about the disaster, as children are born to this day with birth defects and deformities, and women still suffer from extremely high rates of sterility and unexpected abortions in the area.[62]

INDIA'S GENDER STRUCTURE AND THE LIVES OF WOMEN IN BHOPAL

My analysis of malleable gender roles in Bhopal stems from an understanding of social roles that existed before the gas disaster. Two systems have been instrumental in shaping and characterizing Indian social organization, as well as the growth of the Bhopal movement: the *purdah* system and the traditional model of motherhood. *Purdah* tradition is meant to protect women from men, manifesting as a highly domestic lifestyle, little interaction with civic life, and some degree of veiling. Motherhood in Indian culture is not only a phase of a woman's life, but expectations of motherhood shape the whole of her life, from childhood to crone-hood. *Purdah* and motherhood reinforce each other, *purdah* establishing boundaries to a woman's world and motherhood providing the duties and responsibilities with which to legitimate those boundaries. Each system defines a woman's body, the space it occupies, and its purpose. While both of these traditional social systems are changing and modernizing as the westernized twenty-first century courses through India, the stories of women in Bhopal demonstrate that such changes have not been quite as comprehensive as one might expect. Families that still live by traditional customs continue to follow the *purdah* system and expect their females to follow patriarchal rule. Motherhood and fertility continue to be the most respected forms of womanhood and many

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[62] Bhandari, 35.

women consider becoming a mother to fulfill their responsibilities to their nation and to their family.

The Purdah System

Purdah signifies the respect due to women and gives them the privacy due them.[63] Two versions of *purdah* exist, one stemming from Hindu mythology and the other from Islam.[64] Each group has influence the other, in part due to the original similarities between the two systems, as well as the proximity of Muslims and Hindus in many regions, leading to a modern form of *purdah* that has adopted specifics from both religions.[65] Today, differences between *purdah* systems are more diverse between regions than they are between Muslim and Hindu families. *Purdah* as a system of veiling has raised many questions for Western feminists and human rights activists, who argue that the practice is oppressive to women.[66] The true form of *purdah* in India is far more nuanced than this simplified version. Systems of traditional veiling and domestic containment have shifted in modern India. The *burkha*, a garment worn by Muslim women in the presence of any male kin or their husband, and the similar veiling of Hindu women, are now social tools whose meanings are changing.

Purdah demarcates how women can interact with the public sphere in Indian society. A woman who adheres to the *purdah* system interacts very little with politics or the community, and when she does, she wears a burkha or a veil to create a physical boundary around herself.[67] The veil alienates her from the rest of the world. She spends much of her time inside, first in her

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[63] Ibid., 92.
[64] Mandelbaum, David, *Women's seclusion and men's honor: Sex roles in north India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press 1988), 77.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Jeffery, Patricia, *Frogs in a well: Indian women in purdah.* (London: Zed Press 1979), 1.
[67] Jeffrey, 5.

father's and then in her husband's household. *Purdah* determines the landscape for the female body and its private and public presence.

Purdah is another way of controlling the social spheres that a woman can use, much the same social structure as western women have experienced and fought against. This distinction between the private and public social spheres means that women who live by *purdah* must follow strict guidelines when they do go outside or visit religious centers. *Purdah* women work predominantly in the home has a result of these rules and the lack of employment available to them outside the home. They commonly make cloth, garments, or bidis (thin cigarettes) from within the home, primarily piece-meal work that keeps them very occupied during the day. This and the labors of motherhood keep them so busy that they can rarely spend extended periods of time in the presence of other women, in whose company they can shed their veils and their privacy.[68]

These trends are evident in the stories women in the movement tell about themselves. Hajra Bee was not active in the public domain at all before the disaster hit. "I started being active after the disaster," she divulges, "but before that I was a house wife and had no knowledge of the outside world. I discovered the power of standing up and fighting for rights when I fought for compensation for my son."[69] Rasheeda Bee, leader of the Stationery Union, lived in a household that followed a strict *purdah* system. "Like my family," she expresses, "my in-laws also earned a living by rolling Bidis and followed the 'purdah' system. They often didn't give me anything to eat until I had rolled 1,000-1,500 Bidis. I believed this was the way things were and I wouldn't get food if I didn't work."[70] Because of her extreme lack of self-determination, Rasheeda faced difficulties in becoming mobile after her family structure collapsed. When she

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[68] Ibid., 42.
[69] Scandrett et al., 139.
[70]Chingari Trust Bhopal.

chose to receive stationery training through the governmental program, an opportunity she had heard of from a friend, she remembers, "I ventured out of the house, hesitantly asking for directions and finally reaching Bharat Talkies, where I registered my name in the 'stationery'. That was how I was forced out of my home for the first time in my life."[71] The Bhopal movement provided the first steps, quite literally, into the public sphere, physically forcing women out of their houses and toward self-governance.

It may be surprising from a western perspective that these women do not consider *purdah* to be an oppressive or even problematic system. Such constraints on their public presence mean that many women living in *purdah* are not much interested in 'going out' because it is so inconvenient. Due to the rarity of outings, women within strict *purdah* system do not develop a sense of comfort with the outside world, instead remaining guarded.[72] Such stringent *purdah* systems are rare, but not entirely obsolete. Many women in traditional families and communities live by a less severe form of *purdah*, required to wear a veil rather than the full *burkha*, for instance.

Many report that a *burkha* or a veil gives them greater freedom of dress underneath, and the shrouding proves convenient in comparison to the complicated trappings of other outfits.[73] Furthermore, and more seriously, not wearing a burkha in public seems to invite hostile remarks and taunts from men on the street.[74] Indian families often have many children, for various reasons such as infant mortality, familial strength, and the importance of bearing sons. Furthermore, women often bear children from the time they are teenagers until they reach

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[71]Ibid.
[72] Jeffrey, 145.
[73] Ibid., 153.
[74] Ibid., 154.

menopause.[75] With so many children on average to care for and watch over, and throughout such a prolonged period of their lives, a woman's isolation and insulation in the domestic sphere is necessary.[76] This situation is exacerbated by other families and their children living in the same household. *Purdah*, then, becomes the circumstances of duty rather than a series of limitations.

Fertility, Motherhood, and Nation

In traditional Indian society, *purdah* limits women's ability to exist publicly. Veiling, for instance, regulates the manner in which a woman's body exists outside of the home. Unable to participate in society politically or economically, women express their nationalism through their role as mothers in India. They legitimate their citizenship and contribute to the growth and development of society by raising strong future generations, rather than participating in politics. In this way, the ultra-domestic persona of a strong mother also acts as a national citizen. Sociologist Sikata Banerjee discusses the role of the heroic mother, represented both in religious texts and informally in literature, epics, and education.[77] The heroic mother, Banerjee writes, refers to a woman who has overpowered their base sexuality and "become men."[78] While women may not fully embody this role, it describes an ideal toward which women must reach. While such descriptions of womanhood appear harsh and unyielding, the rules laid out for both men and women in religious text sought to protect women from themselves and others. In Hindu texts, women are revered as sacred beings.[79] The *Rigveda*, for example—one of the canonical

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[75] Ibid., 137.
[76] Ibid., 138.
[77] Banerjee, 77.
[78] Ibid., 67.
[79] Raman, Sita Anantha, *Women in India: A social and cultural history Vol. 1* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC. 2009), 27.

texts of Hinduism—describes goddesses who are matronly and maternal, a source of life and abundance.[80]

An Indian woman, sociologist Anjali Widge writes, "is considered 'complete' or 'real' only when she becomes a mother. She proves her womanhood in this way and feels secure in her marriage because it is believed to bond the marital relationship. As a mother she feels she has accomplished what she was supposed to do as an adult woman."[81] Much of a girl's life is in preparation for being a mother. For this reason women in traditional Indian culture are married very young, many from the ages of 12 to 14, although in recent decades marriage age has steadily risen.[82] Men's control of the exchange of women, as Widge illuminates, transforms marriage into "a relationship between two families rather than between two individuals."[83] By such reasoning, a vast majority of families still arrange their children's marriages in order to assure that the woman does not fall into dishonor, although that, too, is changing.[84]

When women fail in their duties as wives, they can no longer navigate Indian society. They do not fill a defined social niche. Women who are divorced, unable to conceive, or sexually active out of wedlock—either as a result of an indiscretion or rape—are less politically, socially, or economically mobile than are respectable women.[85] "There is a huge stigma," Widge states, "attached to being infertile/childless and childlessness has negative implications in Indian society, especially for the woman. Fertility defines womanhood and womanhood is defined by a woman's capacity to 'mother'."[86] While normally 2-3% of women in India are

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[80] Ibid., 28.
[81] Widge, Anjali, "Sociocultural attitudes towards infertility and assisted reproduction in India" (Geneva: World Health Organization 2002), 62.
[82] Bumiller, Elizabeth, *May you be the mother of a hundred sons: A journey among the women in India* (New York: Random House 1990), 27.
[83] Widge, 62.
[84] Bumiller, 24.
[85] Widge, 63.
[86] Ibid., 61.

infertile, women survivors of the Bhopal gas leak experienced much higher rates of infertility due to the reproductive toxicity of MIC. They were unable to bring future children to full term, and the disaster killed or disabled many of their children. In her anthropological narrative, Patricia Jeffery describes motherhood within societies that practice traditional forms of *purdah*, saying of barren women, "such a woman would be pitied—if not worse—for failing in this her essential task. She would be considered a bad omen."[87] Such social stigmas in Bhopal destroyed women's standing within their families as well as the community. After the disaster, women unable to give birth to healthy children experienced this stigma in unprecedented numbers. In extreme cases, hundreds of women were divorced by their husbands and their husband's family when it became clear that they would no longer be able to conceive, and thus continue the family name.

<center>*   *   *</center>

Within a strictly patrilineal, patriarchal society, Indian women are bound to men from one stage of life to the next, their worth dependent upon their abilities as wives and mothers. In the *Mahabharata* text, one verse especially illustrates this point: "Father protects [her] in [her] childhood, husband protects [her] in [her] youth and sons protect [her] in [her] old age: a woman never gains independence."[88] This model for a woman's life, canonized in religious text, has certainly characterized Indian gender relations and has inhibited women's independence for the sake of their protection. The lives Indian women in traditional families are structured around motherhood, insulating women within the families while giving them the responsibility to sustain their children, their husband, and their parents.

This is the gendered landscape of India at the time of the Bhopal disaster. Bhopali

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[87] Jeffery, 83.
[88] Bumiller, 49.

women, living within systems of *purdah* that regulated their public and private existences, experienced the disaster and its aftermath as the disruption of a culture they had known their entire lives. Many male patriarchs— husbands, brothers, fathers and sons—who had been so instrumental in shaping women's lives, were victimized by the gas leak and could no longer be supporters or community leaders; and women, struggling in their roles as mothers, were similarly unable to fulfill their social obligations. As women moved into the public sphere, as wage earners and political activists, they had to navigate a public that they had otherwise avoided.

THE BHOPAL MOVEMENT

On the morning after the disaster—December 3, 1984—more than 1,000 survivors spontaneously organized a protest against Union Carbide, marching through the streets toward UCIL with the goal of burning the facility down.[89] When the plant received word of this, the managers falsely announced on the speaker system that a second leak had occurred. Those who had gathered for the march fled, soon joined by those still inhabiting the surrounding slums, reenacting the scene of the previous night.[90] Over the following days, smaller groups of survivors and other Bhopal residents petitioned local governmental offices and hospitals, beseeching the authorities to provide immediate relief.[91] The streets swarmed with spontaneous, disorganized protest and political activity, often without clear objective or leadership.[92] These activities were the rough beginnings of the Bhopal movement, which continues in full force to this day. As Bhopalis mobilized one step at a time, everyone became political objects in some capacity. Reporters and activist groups besieged Bhopal, taking quotes and photographs and

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[89] Sarangi, "The Movement in Bhopal and its Lessons."
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

pushing the city into the international spotlight.[93] These were the first steps of a movement that would develop and mature through the end of the twentieth century and continue to advocate for Bhopal to this day.

The Rise of the Bhopal Movement

When the gas disaster disintegrated daily life, the gas-affected survivors sought activity to fill their days.[94] Not only did workers employed at the UCIL plant abruptly lose their jobs, but because of the gas's damages, they did not have the same physical capabilities that they had once had.[95] Without the ability to perform physical labor, their wages suffered. Not until 1987 did any substantial relief reach the survivors and their families to make up for wage losses and medical costs, and the dispersal amounts ultimately determined by the government were extremely insufficient. By mid-1985, activist and anthropologist Kim Fortun reports, the Indian government "had identified only about 1,000 'severely affected persons' and had given each an average of $118. Approximately 14,000 identified as 'moderately affected persons' received payments of approximately $16."[96] In short, government officials and policymakers did not provide true relief for Bhopalis and it quickly became clear to the city's residents that they could not rely upon the government's help.

Out of this inactivity rose a vibrant movement to secure the resources that the government and UCC/UCIL were not providing. Outsiders, from other cities in India and from the UK, sprang to action and led the first wave of protests and organization.[97] Outside

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[93] Fortun, Kim, *Advocacy after Bhopal: Environmentalism, disaster, new global orders* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2001), 265
[94] *See* Scandrett et al.
[95] Chingari Trust Bhopal.
[96] Fortun, 179.
[97] Sarangi, "The Movement in Bhopal and its Lessons."

motivators did not want to assume leadership roles and take control, but locals did not have the education or experience in social organization to take the lead themselves.[98] At the forefront was Satinath Sarangi, environmentalist and social worker from a neighboring town, who had lived in Bhopal for a time and rushed to the scene after the gas leak; and Anil Sadgopal, who came to Bhopal to provide political and activist experience.[99] While they were not Bhopali, they were also not strangers, having come only a short way and very much aware of the struggle the gas-affected victims faced, both politically and economically. Sarangi and Sadgopal worked together to organize a survivor advocacy group called the Zahreeli Gas Kand Sangharsh Morcha (referred to simply as the Morcha) a week after the gas leak, before reaching an impasse in perspectives and methods.[100] Sarangi then broke off to become one of the leaders behind the Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA) 1986.[101] While the Morcha is no longer fully active, both organizations supported smaller, more localized efforts rather than push their own agendas. The Morcha, BGIA, and to a greater extent the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB) comprise the outsider organizations, which, so as to preserve the integrity of the city's local community, began to provide services and advice from afar (as opposed to taking leadership of the movement) formally in 2000.[102] Sarangi elucidates this decision, writing, "BGIA's founding was based on the realization of the negative role of non-victim middle class [NVMC] individuals in the survivors' movement. It was a way to contribute the skills/knowledge/contacts/access/privileges of (NVMC) individuals without assuming leadership positions. In size, BGIA was/is far smaller than the survivors organizations. BGIA has supported the survivors' organizations through sharing information, helping with publicity, help

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[98] Mukherjee, 98.
[99] Ibid., 106.
[100] Ibid., 108.
[101] Fortun, 252.
[102] International campaign for justice in Bhopal, 2010 (cited November 2010), available from http://bhopal.net.

with legal actions and networking."[103]

BGIA has been especially active as an environmental organization, demanding that research be done on the lasting ecological impact of MIC toxicity and conducting its own studies when the funds are available.[104] Paramount among the organization's concerns is water, air, and soil safety.[105] In these matters, BGIA has been instrumental in providing the scientific and political expertise to bolster the environmental advocacy of groups like the Sangathan and the Stationery Union.[106] As I will discuss later, however, environmental advocacy was already an important concern for the two survivors organizations based mostly on the members' personal experiences.

BGIA, the Morcha and ICJB provided international communication for the Bhopal movement as a whole. Literate and English-speaking volunteers were difficult to come by in Bhopal, and these larger outsider organizations provided those services to broadcast the localized organizations, accrue funds, and provide small meaningful services like printing flyers, posters, and newsletters for smaller groups.[107] They were especially instrumental in the rise and eventual stability of the Sangathan and the Stationery Union, both of which found support in BGIA and ICJB and continue to benefit from the networks the larger organizations can provide.

The Women of Bhopal

Support organizations had little to do with the inception of the Sangathan and the Stationery Union, both of which started as labor movements. Widespread organization among

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[103] Sarangi, "Bhopal Research."
[104] Fortun, 250.
[105] So much has yet to be understood about MIC that such dangers as bioaccumulation are still possible. While government- and NGO-sponsored scientists continue to study the effects of MIC, the disaster happened so many years ago that the effects have been much diminished over the intervening time.
[106] Ibid., 253.
[107] Ibid., 255.

women was unprecedented, perhaps because women so often worked from within their homes on piecemeal work—an extremely common source of income for women in India.[108] When the families afflicted by the gas leak were not able to support themselves as they had before the disaster, the government intervened and tried to provide employment for those most in need beginning in 1986.[109] However, government-run employment programs came nowhere near to covering the true need for employment.

Various programs were geared toward certain demographics, such as men who had been previously employed but no longer had the physical endurance to continue doing so. Centers were also designed to employ women. Among these, the two largest centers to be set up were a sewing center and a stationery center, the sewing center employing as many as 800 women and the stationery center employing 200. Both were intended to help widows specifically, so they did not have any other source of income from a husband's labor.[110] The centers, however, did not have the resources or the drive to support their employees. Low wages, harsh working conditions, and inconsistent levels of production led to labor unrest in the centers.

In December of 1986, 600 women employed at the government-run sewing center demonstrated at the private residence of Bhopal's Chief Minister.[111] Four days before, the Chief Minister had closed down the sewing center.[112] Although the wages from the sewing center were meager—approximately $7 a day—each of their family relied upon the small income to keep afloat. The demonstration in front of the Chief Minister's house was the first of many protests and sit-ins continuing through April of 1987.[113] That April, the Madhya Pradesh

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[108] Radhakrishnan, 200.
[109] Fortun, 217.
[110] Scandrett et al., 64.
[111] Fortun, 219.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Scandrett et al., 63.

precinct consented to the protestors' demands and reopened a larger and improved sewing center with better wages and greater job security for 2,300 women.[114] The women involved in the small movement were astounded with their success. Of the experience, the women said that even though they had never considered themselves activists, they also saw no alternative to their actions.[115]

The 600 women who had participated, gratified by this preliminary success, began organizing more formally and expanding their goals in order to secure help for others. Thus, they created the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan in 1987.[116] The members voted that Rabiya Bee, one of the original agitators, take over leadership of the organization.[117] They had realized that their government was only deaf in one ear and that if they yelled loudly enough they would be heard. Rabiya Bee remembers thinking, "We were underestimated at that time by the Government but they were yet to taste the real power of women."[118] To show them the extent of their "real power," the Sangathan expanded its membership beyond the sewing center and broadened its goals to voice the interests of as many people as possible. The organization provided its members moral and emotional support as well, support they could not find elsewhere. In the next years, the Sangathan grew to be the largest organization in Bhopal, boasting an incredible 10,000 members after only two years.[119]

After their success in securing employment for themselves, the organization focused on much larger issues. They decried globalization, the practice of multinational corporations to target underdeveloped countries—resulting in chemical imperialism—and corporate

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[114] Fortun, 220.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid., 217.
[117] Scandrett et al., 63.
[118] Ibid., 64.
[119] Fortun, 220.

irresponsibility. They realized that their government, intended to protect them against exactly these atrocities, was more concerned with bolstering the economy with foreign business than caring for its stricken citizens. The Sangathan articulated these complaints, as well as the policy changes they wanted to see, to Bhopal's public and the international community. To implement these changes, members of the organization began to educated themselves on the effects of MIC, the studies under way in Bhopal, the legal and political minutiae of the Bhopal case, and the history and trajectory of corporate crime.

In order to expand their influence and their political might, Rabiya Bee and other prominent members sought new leadership, this time looking for a man to be the voice and face of the women's organization. They chose Abdul Jabbar to take the position in 1988, based on his skills and his previous support of the organization.[120] Abdul was a friend and close adviser for many of the members of Sangathan, including Rabiya Bee and Rehana Begum—whom he later married—but he was still an outsider from the women's shared experiences and the history of their organization.[121] His new position elicited a strong reaction from the group and ultimately created a schism in the group between those who agreed that his expertise and eloquence was necessary and those who considered him too much of an outsider.[122]

At the same time as the Sangathan grew and matured, the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationery Karmchari Sangh—the Stationery Union—organized and began motivating for change as well. Its inception, also in 1986, was very similar to that of the Sangathan. The Madhya Pradesh province, as part of its initiative to create employment for survivors, set up stationery training opportunities for women.[123] The stationery production center provided

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[120] Scandrett et al., 93.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Fortun,
[123] Mukherjee, 105.

training and work for 100 women, but after only three months, the managers of the center

informed the women that they could now make products at home and sell them on their own.[124]

Suddenly stripped of their income, the women realized that they needed to express their concerns

for continued employment. Soon after, the women elected Rasheeda Bee and Champa Devi

Shukla to take the lead due to their eloquence and motivational skills.

Kim Fortun describes the roots of the Sangathan and the Stationery Union, writing that,

"Women's activism was issue oriented and need based, and therefore a lot of it was pragmatic

and anchored in interpersonal relationships that tied the home to the workplace."[125] To carry this

thought further, members of the Sangathan and the Stationery Union needed badly the

employment opportunities created by the government to feed their families, and when these

programs disintegrated, they had no way of supporting their families. The need to feed their

children and provide them with medical care pushed them toward action in the first place. Their

environmental and political awareness were to follow from that initial drive.

The Stationery Union fought in 1986 to recover their jobs, sitting-in at the State

Secretariat for three months until at last the secretariat met their demands.[126] Less than a year

later, they renewed their demonstrations to fight for adequate wages and more acceptable hours.

They continued to demonstrate on labor issues, their membership growing and shrinking in size

as women became more motivated and more discouraged in turn. From 1989 to 1999, the Union

staged hundreds of demonstrations, including one padyatra—a marching campaign or journey—

from Bhopal to Delhi across 750 kilometers. (This first padyatra would be reenacted again in

2002, and once more in 2008.) It was not until 2000 that the Stationery Union broadened its

perspective. At that point, they joined ICJB in order to receive international support from other

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[124] Scandrett et al., 108.
[125] Fortun, 104.
[126] Chingari Trust Bhopal

environmental and labor activists. ICJB provided them the financial support and political advice that they needed to become even more effectual.

The members of the Union were unsure about this transition to broaden their goals beyond their own financial needs. Many thought that the Union should be based on what its members directly needed, while others thought the group should protect the *rights* of its members against an uncaring government and a soulless corporation. Ultimately, a majority of the organization's members followed Rasheeda Bee and Champa Devi Shukla while a small faction broke off and created its own organization, the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationery Karmchari Morcha.[127] The Stationery Union was then able to reimagine the goals of the organization.

The Bhopal movement as a whole was shifting, as well: after 15 years, the Indian government and UCC had yet to provide full compensation, health care, or research initiatives. Freelancing researchers had conducted their own studies in the intervening years, and their findings had emphasized the need for a comprehensive study of the site and of the effects of MIC. Champa Devi Shukla describes the transition, reflecting that, "We are living in changed times and our protest too had to change directions… It is through the union that I was given a forum to see my own sufferings in the perspective of the larger suffering of the people of Bhopal… I am now part of a people's movement that helps women understand their rights as political beings."[128]

The women involved in the movement adopted the identity of environmental advocate with surprising ease. Their lifestyle transition seemed so instantaneous after the disaster that the

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[127] Scandrett et al., 179; Mukherjee, 120.
[128] Mukherjee, 120-121.

true depth of changes to their lives remains undisclosed. However, the clash of tradition and modernity that each woman experienced was by no means a smooth process.

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF DISASTER

Champa's story of becoming a political activist is common among women who survived the Bhopal disaster. While all victims of the gas leak experienced family fragmentation, loss, and debilitating health effects, it was women who lost their reproductive health in startling numbers at the same moment that their families were rendered unprotected and at high risk. The cumulative tragedies experienced by Bhopali women permanently changed their collective roles as women, wives, and mothers. Champa illustrates this with her own experiences, intimating, "I felt my life was empty and barren. I was in a state of mental paralysis. But, seeing the families around me, I soon realized there were many like me who had lost their loved ones to the gas. Life would have to go on. That's how I decided to dedicate the remaining days of my life fighting for justice for the Bhopal gas victims."[129] The tumult of the disaster's aftermath disrupted Bhopal's culture and daily life, and women felt their routines and the structure of their lives fluctuate through rough transitions.

Without finding any closure legally, politically, medically, or economically, the survivors did not and could not settle into any stable way of life. The disaster thoroughly altered men's lives, as well. Due to maladies incurred from the gas leak, many men who had previously worked as laborers did not have the strength or respiratory endurance they had once had, and their wages suffered for it.[130] Thus, families were thrust into deeper poverty immediately after the disaster. These hardships also threatened the Bhopali men's masculine identity, because they

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[129] Chingari Trust Bhopal.
[130] Ibid.

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were no longer able to provide adequately for their families.[131] Many injured men were suddenly dependents of the state and their families. Fluctuations, therefore, in both feminine and masculine identities thoroughly reshaped the social landscape of Bhopal and set the stage for women to gain political and economic momentum in the disaster's aftermath.

Despite the new positions of women in Bhopal's society, the traditional roles of womanhood and motherhood still held against the torrent of change in many families. A number of them did not move into the public sphere. Childlessness, divorce, or the devastation of their community caused some women to leave Bhopal and live with family elsewhere. While women lost children or their ability to have children in the future, many of them also adopted dependents as a result of the newly orphaned child population in Bhopal. With an enlarged family came extra domestic responsibilities and less public mobility for women in those families. Furthermore, surviving children and husbands suffered from the maladies incurred by the MIC, so they now required even more attention in the home. Women themselves, of course, also suffered from various injuries like lung, brain, and heart damage that made it more difficult for them to be active and able.

However, organization among women was so unprecedented that even women who remained in the domestic sphere were affected by the new publicity of women's lives across Bhopal. Prominent leading activists traveled to Europe and the United States to garner support for their cause, speaking to large audiences in London and New York.[132] Women who had worn some form of veiling since puberty were suddenly in public, making impassioned speeches to a large crowd, arguing against male politicians in New Delhi and calling for the imprisonment of

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[131] Goldman, Robert P., "Language, Gender and Power: The Sexual Politics of Language and Language Acquisition in Traditional India," in *Invented identities: The interplay of gender religion and politics in India*, eds. Leslie, Julia, and Mary McGee, from <u>SOAS Studies on South Asia: Understandings and Perspectives</u> (New Delhi: Oxfofd University Press 2000).
[132] Fortun, 239; Scardrett et al.,210.

American businessmen. Amongst each other, women's conversations turned from domestic matters to environmentalist subjects, trying to recall the details of sicknesses they had witnessed, comparing methods for protests, and thinking up slogans for future signs. Women involved in the movement were often arrested even, as a result of their activism in Bhopal and New Delhi.

While each story is distinctive, common themes among the Bhopali women's experiences point to the societal transformations that affected them as a community. Many women gained some degree of economic independence, either through their employment in governmental centers like the sewing center and the stationery center or through governmental handouts for medical expenses. Economic self-determination combined with newfound political activity, creating social niches that had never existed before. With their domestic realities bared open, women lost their sense of ownership and control over the household and the family and began to advocate for Bhopal's and India's liberation from the corporate threat that had proven so deadly.

Tradition and Activism

The gas leak and the subsequent movement entirely uprooted social structure and redefined gender roles. The Sangathan and the Stationery Union gave women a political presence and economic opportunities not previously experienced. As activist groups, both organizations improved the lives of women in many ways. Each group advocated for employment opportunities for women, which provided victims with a source of funds independent of governmental handouts. Through employment, women gained political and economic agency, an important development for many of them who had lost their husbands and therefore their economic proxy. Rabiya Bee, for instance, whose husband had abandoned her with five children after the disaster, became an articulate political voice for Bhopal, continuing

as an adviser and speaker after Abdul Jabbar took on a leading role.[133]

Being an activist was a complete shift from the way that women had been expected to live prior to the disaster. Many found that the traditional systems of *purdah* were not compatible with the modern and international role of an activist. Activist Rabiya Bee relates that she "joined the [Sangathan] in the *burkha* because my husband was [a Muslim priest] and I was from a very orthodox family. I gave it up because women in *burkhas* are looked down upon, they are considered stupid, illiterate, and without manners."[134] Rabiya's dislike of the *burkha* stemmed from the way that the western world considered the third world woman underneath the garment, views that were increasingly adopted by modern Indians in urban centers. Even in light of the developments to Indian culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, westerners continue to take for granted that Indian women are violently oppressed, and the *burkha* is an easily targeted symbol of that oppression. The condemnation of veiling made it difficult for women of the older generations to negotiate systems of *purdah* in their own families. Conversely, Hamida Bee, an important organizer in the Sangathan, describes how discarding the veil represented a loss of social respect: "I used to give my speeches wearing my *purdah* back then…Jabbar [the male leader of the Sangathan] was concerned that I did not give it up…[He] made me take my *burkha* off… My perspective changed slowly, I felt very awkward for some time. Now I do not need to wear a *burkha* to show that I am dignified."[135] Hamida's story is especially striking, as her experience illustrates the internal conflict women experienced in forfeiting cultural tradition for the sake of political might. Each woman's personal story attests to the difficulties of transitioning from a traditional gender system to the international political arena and the changing values that accompanied an activist lifestyle. The disaster, then, created a space in

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[133] Scandrett et al., 63.
[134] Ibid., 66.
[135] Ibid., 88.

which modernity and traditionalism clashed, as western culture judged India's customs and as

Indians struggled to maintain their cultural identity in the wake of such invasions.

Women as International Environmental Advocates

The events in Bhopal and the government's reaction galvanized concerned citizens to act.

Many of the women had been aware of environmental pollution even before the disaster; those

who lived close to the plant had seen that water deteriorated their clothing and dishes daily.[136]

Based on these experiences, Fortun writes, the Stationery Union focused on "cleaning up the

abandoned chemicals on the site, while ensuring adequate health care and proper economic

rehabilitation for the survivors of the disaster and their children."[137] These issues grew out of the

women's own experiences in the disaster. Health care, for example, continued to be a problem

for women especially, in part because of a reluctance in traditional India to address women's

health publicly as well as the perennial impacts of MIC.

When activists were asked what spurred them into action, many of them reference their

own families and their concern for their children's future. Om Wati Bai, a local activist for

ICJB, writes, "People do not want to think about no future for their children… For me the

priority should be that we do not make the same mistakes in the future for which our children

have to pay. My own grandchildren continue to suffer, two generations after the gas leak."[138]

Women like Hajra Bee entered the movement looking for compensation or justice for their

children who had been hurt by the gas leak.[139] During her case before the Madhya Pradesh

court, she exclaimed, "I do not want the money, or my son! I want my 4 year old son like he was

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[136] Scandrett et al., 139.
[137] Mukherjee, 118.
[138] Scandrett, et al., 176.
[139] Ibid., 139.

before the gas leak. I do not want a gas exposed kid. I do not want a sick son… My son's

childhood was lost, he could not read, write, or play, was bed ridden all the time… How far can a

mother take this?"[140] Rasheeda Bee remembers hearing the day after the disaster someone

predicting, "[M]others who were carrying on that day, even babies older than a month in the

womb, they would most likely grow up to give birth to deformed children."[141] This prophesy

proved true. Razia Bee intimates, "My eldest son died after three months [after the gas leak].

We tried everything to save his life. After that I gave birth to a son. He was born sickly and had

strange looking yellow colored eruptions on his neck. When he was about a year old…he died in

his sleep. Another daughter was born to me. She was sick all the time and we lost her too."[142]

Razia Bee was unable to pay for these medical bills and entered the labor force to cover rising

costs for keeping her family alive, where she got involved in the Sangathan.

Because the Union had already traversed political ground in their search for labor

equality and economic mobility, they were able to use those political connections and techniques

to address larger problems. The women who continue to be involved have become very much

concerned with environmental damage and the lack of remediation. Never before had such an

ambitious environmentalism been enacted in Bhopal, and certainly not by women.[143] But having

overcome the very worst of the gas leak, they turned to the long-lasting effects of the MIC on

their water supply, their soil, and their air. Again, central to their struggle for uncontaminated

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[140] Ibid., 139-40.
[141] Ibid.,114.
[142] Mukherjee, 53.
[143] Raman, *Women in India: A social and cultural history Vol. 2*, 210-11. India, still very much an industrial
society, is largely unconcerned with environmental pollution and industrial damage. Even so, one prominent
environmental movement is the Chipko Movement of the 1970s, in Tehri Gahrwal—an ecofeminist movement led
by tribal women of the Himalayan foothills. The organization began as a struggle against loggers who encroached
on the livelihood of those who lived in the foothills, but since then the Chipko movement has broadened and now
focuses on issues like violence against women and women's health.   The Chipko Movement and its philosophies
did not play into the development of Bhopal's own movement. However, it is important to realize that there is at
least a shallow history of environmentalism in India, and that movement comprises a very strong female element.

environmental resources were their children.[144]

As they took the international stage, activists began to look to the problems afflicting the world outside of Bhopal. Their analysis of the problems that afflicted their city and the reasons behind the disaster, they saw, were problems that initiated outside of Bhopal and could infiltrate any number of cities as readily. The local and global dichotomy that had been so sensible to the women's lives—local was the market and the household, and global was anything else—was breaking down.[145] Interestingly, throughout the movement and even in its early days, Bhopali activists had used in their chants and slogans a vernacular that was already very global by nature. It was only when they realized that protest and a people's movement could have true impact that they began compiling these larger schemas into a coherent transnational social movement.

The Sangathan and the Stationery Union were central to this shift toward the global and the disintegration of the local-global dichotomy in Bhopal. Rasheeda Bee articulated the larger motives behind the movement, of which she became such an integral part, saying,

> "This fight is not for the gas survivors or compensation but a fight for the world. And the fight is against the companies which even with all the knowledge are still spreading toxics across the globe. And to save the world from this the struggle in Bhopal has to spread across the world. Bhopal should be taken as a lesson to learn from, an example which the environment itself has given to people that we should not push our luck and try to change the simple ways of life."

Rasheeda represents an enlightened understanding of an international community and how Bhopal's own movement and demands factor into it.   Sharing in this same mindset, Hajra Bee writes, "If Bhopal gets justice then the whole world will get justice."[146] By this logic, Bhopali protestors had demanded that Warren Anderson, the executive chair of UCC, be extradited or

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[144] Scandrett et al., 113.
[145] Mukherjee, 170.
[146] Scandrett et al., 147.

even hung.[147] These demands, however, were slogans meant to shock and worry corporations like UCC and to show that the unreachable people behind the chemicals were responsible.[148]

Both women's organizations attacked environmental degradation with ferocity. While in its later stages the Stationery Union articulated environmental issues more specifically than the Sangathan, the latter has been vehemently opposed to toxic colonialism, to borrow Bullard's phrase. The Sangathan became much more international in focus under the leadership of Abdul Jabbar.   Jabbar sough political support and consultation from environmental and human rights organizations worldwide.[149] Through these progressive initiatives, the two groups established themselves as environmental organizations. When they joined an international network of political support, their roles in environmentalism were further fortified.[150] The Sangathan proved more effective in its early years, due at least in part to its broader membership and mission. Not having gained a great deal of momentum in its first stages, the Stationery Union nonetheless rose to political prominence very quickly after 2000, and in 2002, they staged a massive demonstration against Dow Chemical—the new owner of UCC—in Delhi.[151]

For the injustice they have suffered at the hands of corporations and their very own government, the Bhopali community might have declined into despondency after the international community ceased to listen to their plight. Yet these women have proven that they will not be victimized. They have come to own the power of their agency in the community and on the world stage as protectors of a collective and multifaceted cause. Through the process of determined activism and identity transformation, the women of Bhopal sought to protect their community and provide a supportive space for its recuperation.

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[147] Furtun 241.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Fortun, 240.
[150] Mukherjee, 139.
[151] International campaign for justice in Bhopal.

FOLLOWING BHOPAL'S EXAMPLE

Much like Hajra Bee's advocacy for her son before court, so too do the women in the movement seek a Bhopal free of death and malady, unpolluted, clean, and wholesome. In their struggle to recover Bhopal, they triggered the reorganization of Bhopal's social landscapes. Their determination to find the political redress appropriate for the disaster positioned them at the front of the Bhopal movement. The women's very participation in the labor force, which catapulted them into activism, functioned as a source of income to provide for their families and their children, their wages a resource they had to protect. They began the fight as mothers, avenging their children's and their future children's deaths, and ended up as stewards to Bhopal. Their social purpose as procreators and protectors manifested in a multidimensional and revolutionizing social movement built around redefining the shape and significance of a woman's body.

Such subtleties are lost in the alluring simplicity of traditional ecofeminist analysis. A shallow understanding of Bhopal's women's movement reads like a case study in ecofeminism, as women, repressed by an industrializing capitalist culture, see the connections between their own plight and that of the natural world. While ecofeminism as a philosophy and a form of activism is by no means static and varies widely depending upon who defines the term, many conceptions of ecofeminism are inadequate to describe clearly the interaction between gender, feminism, environmental degradation, and environmentalism.

If we limit the analysis of Bhopal to one shaded by essentialist ecofeminism, we overlook the true complexity of social roles and hierarchies, the prescriptions for women to be mothers, and the economic convenience of motherhood—all constructs that have already been analyzed

within ecofeminism and feminism. Ecofeminism as an ideology and as an ideal will only reach

its full potential when it incorporates social constructivism into its analysis of society and does

not so fundamentally contradict feminism. By understanding the origins of motherhood and not

taking for granted the functions of the female body, ecofeminist analysis can provide true insight

into the constructed relationship between the feminine and the natural world. In doing so,

ecofeminist analysis shows that, just as natural resources do not exist for the proliferation of the

human race, the female body does not function merely as a procreator and shelter for future

generations. The female body must not be interpreted by its utility to society, but rather, it must

exist as an end in itself.

Bhopal as a Case Study for Complicating Ecofeminism

As the women of Bhopal began to move beyond their roles as domestic caretakers, they

challenged the spaces they could inhabit, creating a public persona that had been unavailable to

them before. They did so by using their bodies in new ways: as protestors, as marchers, as a

unified physical presence that was stronger than the individual. They filled the streets rather than

their yards, they filled parks and news headlines. They infiltrated spaces that had never before

been open to them as organizers, collaborators, and spokespeople. In using the female body for

protest, they diversified its social purposes and developed it for their own means.

The intractable identity of mother that has so consumed the female body stems from a

destructive rationalization of exploitation. Val Plumwood characterizes this "ecological crisis of

reason" as the flawed logic that leads humans to believe that ecological abundance is

inexhaustible and that it exists for the soul purpose of sustaining human life. Plumwood writes

that human cultures must develop "an environmental culture that values and fully acknowledges

the non-human sphere and our dependency on it, and is able to make good decisions about how we live and impact on the non-human world."[152] The destructive misconception that the female body exists exclusively for procreation is rationalized with the same logic used to justify the exploitation of natural elements.

Purdah and domestic motherhood acted as controls over the female body in traditional Indian culture, determining the spaces in which it moved and its utility to society. Only when Bhopali women's bodies could no longer function as procreators and their domestic lives shattered were they able to gain self-determination over their bodies, which allowed them to be productive in capacities beyond the domestic realm. The transition, as the women in the movement attest, was difficult, and they did not have *full* self-control of their bodily existence. Even so, the female body in Bhopal became a public entity rather than an appropriated instrument of human development. Bhopali women cultivated their own environmental relationship based on their role as mothers to their families and communities.

As their bodies became public representatives, Bhopali women traversed the lines delineating the personal and the collective. Their own injuries and the injuries of their children were political tools, and to be effective politically, they used their personal lives for public consumption. Part of this campaign to let the outside world into their intimate lives was an international press conference in April of 2008, during which five gas-affected women brought their children who had been born with birth defects.[153] The plight of the gas victims was no longer advocacy for personal needs, but rather the activists' individual stories became a collaborative story of all of the gas-affected victims.[154] Through this collective narrative, they became anonymous for the sake of the larger cause, their bodies no longer personal identities.

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[152] Plumwood, *Environmental culture: The ecological crisis of reason*, 3.
[153] Mukherjee, 180.
[154] Ibid., 160.

Bhopal, a community in crisis, needed nurturing and protecting, and the city's mothers met this need. The women rushed into this new public role with surprising alacrity. The circumstances arising from the disaster necessitated their newfound public presence, as first their economic need, then their desire for legal justice pushed them to fight. In this same way, they redefined their environmental identities, becoming politically, communally, and publicly concerned about chemical pollution and ecosystem degradation. This public relationship with the natural world and their drive to eradicate pollution and contamination contrasts sharply with their previously individual concerns about environmental resources in their own homes.

Natural resources, those deemed valuable and those considered worthless, have been exploited as if meant to be drained. Pollution, of air, water, and organism, is now an acceptable and expected side effect of industrial and technological progress. Simultaneously, the female body has been controlled by forces outside of itself. Procreation and the survival of the human race comprise the social identity of the female body, but ecofeminism sees only the control over the tool of procreation without challenging the concept that procreation is a tool. By incorporating the concept of social constructivism into ecofeminism, the ideology is broadened and nuanced so as to provide a cultural history behind its analysis.

The Bhopal case must be understood from a complex perspective that looks at its details rather than its generalities. Using this emerging ecofeminism to analyze the Bhopal women's movement shows the encompassing contexts in Bhopal, the origins of gender roles, and the evolution of the gender paradigm over the course of the disaster. Adopting social constructivism into ecofeminism also illuminates the social origins of the feminization of nature, the impact that has on the human-nature relationship, and its conception of both women and nature as extractive resources. When Bhopal is understood through this new form of ecofeminism, it becomes clear

that the women's movement was not the result of women's sensitivity to nature, but rather it was an energetic process that grew first from the social expectations of motherhood and developed into a challenge to their social limitations. This struggle manifested as a contestation over the physical female presence: her face and body veiled or in international news stories; her voice contained in the house and spent on domestic issues or chanting political slogans.

CONCLUSION

The struggle for justice in Bhopal is far from over. The problems Bhopali activists address continue to shift and transform in accordance with contemporary issues, and their tools of political combat evolve with them. The ideology of ecofeminism has the potential to give great depth to the Bhopali women's struggle when their experiences are analyzed through an ecofeminist perspective. However, the pervasive version of traditional ecofeminist analysis cannot comprehend the true history and context of their activism. It is damaging to their campaign to articulate their efforts as those of earth mothers. The same story framed in a contemporary, complicated ecofeminism reveals that women's movements are proactive, not reactive, and arise under the complex circumstances of social renegotiation. As the women in Bhopal redefined what their bodies could be used for, they broke the social scripts of motherhood, a social transformation made possible only by the intense instability of Bhopal in the aftermath of disaster.

Bhopal is still a battleground for the gas-affected survivors of the Bhopal disaster who continue to push for corporate responsibility and legal redress. In 2001, Dow Chemical became the new owner of Union Carbide Corporation.[155] As part of this transition, Dow had to accept liability for any outstanding cases. The company took responsibility for two cases of asbestos

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[155] Mukherjee, 63.

poisoning in the United States, but when Dow was asked to cover the future costs of removing the chemical waste still covering Bhopal, it refused.[156] Dow's irresponsibility and denial of guilt ushered in another wave of demonstrations and the movement's realization that the struggle for justice was far from over.[157] One child, a second-generation gas victim, profoundly asks, "Do we live in a democracy? Why are people sacrificed for profit? Why no action has been taken despite twenty-four years of the tragedy? Why do government continue to do business with Dow and UCC when they are refusing to take responsibility for Bhopal?"[158]

With this new corporate challenge has come a new activist surge, this time coming from those who did not even exist at the time of the original disaster. As the second generation of victims grows into maturity, they are beginning to take up the fight for justice. Sarita Malviya, now 18 years old, "has become a leading advocate of youth activism, especially amongst those who continue to be affected by contaminated water…Intelligent, articulate, and angry, Sarita is a likely candidate for the next generation of leaders."[159] Sarita is an independent spokesperson for the youth of Bhopal. She became involved through her mother's generation of activists. In 2008, Sarita toured the United States, speaking for Bhopal for a new and very powerful generation, and blowing away the myth that young people cannot participate in politics as their elders can. The group Children against Dow Chemical has joined this fresh movement, as well. They organized in 2008, as a result of their participation in the Stationery Union's third *padyatra* of that year. They challenge the new ownership of UCC by Dow Chemical and continue to petition the Indian government to address their claims for redress.[160] The older generation of activists, many in the autumn of their lives, are beginning to step down for this younger

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[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid., 147.
[158] Ibid., 179-180.
[159] Scandrett et al., 209.
[160] Mukherjee, 147.

generation, giving them the tools and information they need.

It is becoming increasingly important to understand the contexts of disasters today. As industrialization accelerates worldwide, corporations use more and more advanced chemicals without comparable mechanisms to protect those country's populations from disaster. It is not only the developing world, either: BP oil production in the Gulf of Mexico resulted in a devastating ecological disaster in April of 2010 that destroyed the Gulf ecosystem and with it the livelihoods of those who depended upon its preservation.[161] Even more recently, in March 2011, Japan experienced an earthquake measuring 9.0, which has resulted in the blowout of a nuclear center, rising death counts, and the evacuation of 200,000 people.[162]

These are small snapshots of processes leading up to and continuing from these disasters. The news will disappear from headlines long before true restoration can happen. It is vital to consider past and future disasters with a perceptive eye on how cultural distinctions determine the shape and scope of disasters, how disasters will influence gender systems, and how best to understand human-ecosystem interactions. The task of cultivating an environmental rationality that will promote sustainable interactions between humans and ecosystems is increasingly vital to human survival, and the philosophical navigation toward that relationship should be a delicate evolution of human consciousness.

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[161] Mason, Rowena, "BP oil spill fund sued for fraud and negligence" *The Telegraph*, 28 Feb., 2011. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/8350754/BP-oil-spill-fund-sued-for-fraud-and-negligence.html
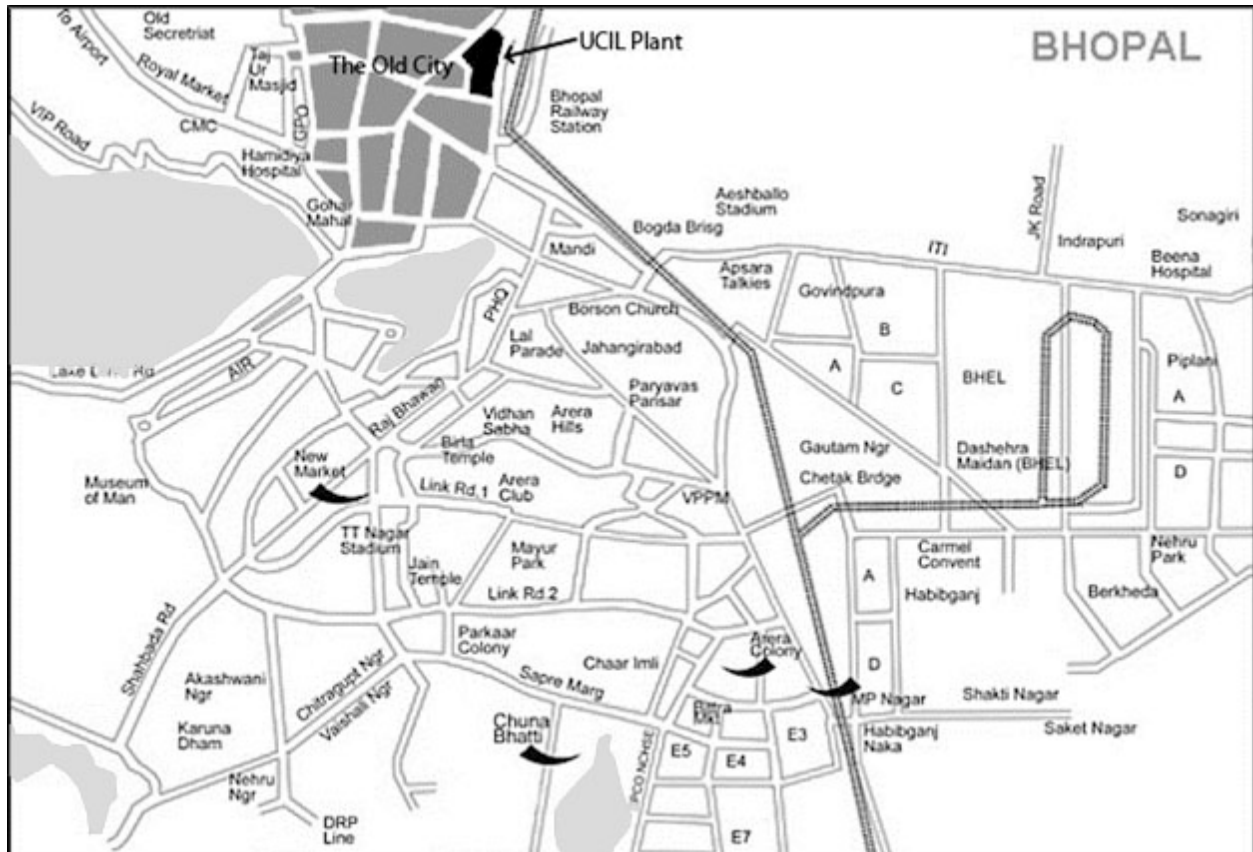[162] Grammaticas, Damian, "Japan earthquake: Explosion at Fukushima nuclear plant," *BBC*, 2011.

MAP OF INDIA

Bhopal is located in the Madhya Pradesh state, in central India.

MAP OF BHOPAL, INDIA

The UCIL plant is located near the railway station (indicated in black). The Old City, indicated in gray, surrounds it. Nearby are two large lakes and the source of the Old City's water.

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