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THE TRAUMA CAUSED BY BHOPAL GAS LEAK TRAGEDY BASED ON AMULYA MALLADI'S 'A BREATH OF FRESH AIR'

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ABSTRACT

The world's most industrial disaster which is known as The Bhopal Disaster or Bhopal Gas Tragedy changed the routine life of people in Bhopal. The consequences spread out all over the state. No one could pacify them. It occurred on the night of 2-3 December 1984 at The Union Carbide India Ltd. (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Amulya Malldi in her novel 'A Breath of Fresh Air' depicts the mental and physical agony suffered by the victims of Bhopal Tragedy. The protagonist Anjali, reveals her pain very effectively. She married an army officer, named Prakash who led a filthy life. She was not happy with him and forced to get divorce. In the second marriage she gave birth to a baby, Amar, who was the victim of Bhopal Tragedy. Anjali, the protagonist, explained her pain very deeply in a colorful manner.

Key words: Union Carbide India Ltd. (UCIL), Methyl Isocyanate (MIC), Helter-skelter in no particular order, Endosulfan, off-patent organochlorine insecticide

The world's most industrial disaster which is known as The Bhopal Disaster or Bhopal Gas Tragedy changed the routine life of people in Bhopal. The consequences spread out all over the state. No one could pacify them. It occurred on the night of 2-3 December 1984 at The Union Carbide India Ltd. (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Around 500,000 people were the victims to methyl isocyanate gas and other chemicals. The toxic substance made its bad impact on people and surroundings very badly. Estimates vary on the death toll. The official immediate death toll was 2,259. The government of Madhya Pradesh confirmed a total of 3,787 deaths related to the gas release. Others estimate 8,000 died within two weeks and another 8,000 or more have since died from gas-related diseases. Government affidavit in 2006 stated the leak caused 558,125 injuries

including 38,428 temporary partial injuries and approximately 3,900 severely and permanently disabling injuries.

WORKING CONDITION OF MIC: The working conditions of the employees were so pathetic. No safety rules were there. Promotions were halted. So the skilled workers shifted to some other best working places. In fact, by 1984, only six of the original twelve operators were still working with MIC and the number of supervisory personnel was also halved. No maintenance supervisor was placed on the night shift and instrument readings were taken every two hours, rather than the previous and required one hour readings.

One employee was fired after going on a 15 day hunger strike. 70% of the plant's employees were fined before the disaster for refusing to

deviate from the proper safety regulations under pressure from the management.

It was a shocking news that the MIC tank alarms had not been working for four years and there was only one manual back-up system, compared to a four-stage system used in the United States. The flare tower and several vent gas scrubbers had been out of service for months before the disaster. Only one gas scrubber was operating; it could not treat such a large amount of MIC with sodium hydroxide (caustic soda) which would have brought the concentration down to a safe level. The flare tower could handle only a quarter of the gas that leaked in 1984, and moreover it was out of order at the time of the incident. Another fact was the refrigeration system was idle to reduce energy costs. The MIC was kept 20 degree Celsius, not the 4.5degrees advised by the manual. Even the steam boiler, intended to clean the pipes, was in operational for unknown reasons. Slip-blind plates that would have prevented water from pipes being cleaned from leaking into the MIC tanks, had the valves been faulty, were not installed and their installation had been omitted from the cleaning check list. The water pressure which was too weak to spray the escaping gases from the stack. They could not spray high enough to reduce the concentration of escaping gas. In addition to it, carbon steel vales were used at the factory, even though they were known to corrode when exposed to acid.

THE EFFECT: The initial effects of exposure were coughing, vomiting, severe eye irritation and a feeling of suffocation. People got disturbed by these symptoms fled away from the plant. The people who ran were forced to inhale more than those who had a vehicle to ride. Owing to their height, children and other people of shorter stature inhaled higher concentrations. Thousands of people had succumbed by the morning hours. There were mass funerals and mass cremations. Bodies were dumped into the Narmadha River, less than 100 km from Bhopal.

Within a few days, trees in the victims became barren, and 2,000 bloated animal carcasses had to be disposed of. On 16 December, tanks 611 and 619 were emptied of the remaining MIC. This led to a second mass evacuation from Bhopal.

Formal statements were issued that air, water, vegetation and food stuffs were safe within the city. At the same time people were informed that poultry was unaffected, but were warned not to consume fish. No one under the age of 18 was registered at the time of the accident. The number of children exposed to the gases was atleast 200,000.

Background of writing 'A Breath of Fresh Air'

Amulya Malladi who was born in 1974, at Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India, depicted in her novel 'A Breath of Fresh Air' the consequences of the 'Bhopal Tragedy' in a simple style. She got her bachelor's degree in electronics engineering from Osmania University, Hyderabad, India and her masters degree in journalism from the University of Memphis, Tennessee, United States.

After graduating from the University of Memphis, she worked as an online editor for a high-tech publishing house in San Francisco and then as a marketing manager for a software company in the Silicon Valley. Due to Malladi's father's occupation in the Indian Army, Amulya got the chance to roam around the country. At the age of 11, when she found herself immersed in a world of goblins, pixies and fairies in the works of Enid Blyton, she wrote her first handwritten book of 50 pages.

She revealed in an interview, the reason for writing this novel-'A Breath of Fresh Air'. Since her Dad was working in the Corps of Electrical And Mechanical Engineers, she was living in Bhopal with her family, when she was nine years old. It was on the night of December 3rd, 1984, methyl isocyanate gas leaked from Bhopal's Union Carbide plant that killed many people. When this tragedy occurred, her family and she were staying at the army center which was a few kilometers away from the plant. Luckily the wind blew the opposite side: they remained unaffected by the gas leak. However, she remembered how those affected described the methyl isocyanate gas as chili powder in their lungs. These reminiscence haunted her and urged her to pen it down in the form of a novel.

The protagonist of this novel is Anjali. As usual on the night of December 3, 1984, Anjali waits for her army officer husband to pick her up at the train station in Bhopal, India. She could not meet

him there. All of a sudden, she felt something unusual.

"I became aware of it for the first time when I inhaled and felt my lungs being scratched by nails from the inside, like someone had thrown red chili powder into my nose. I took another breath: it did not change. I clasped my throat and closed my eyes as they started to burn and water. Something was wrong, my mind screamed wildly as I, along with the others, tried to seek a reason for the tainted air we were breathing" (Malladi,3).

She got help of a Sardarji who called for a taxi. People were running helter-skelter, trying to breathe. Something is wrong. Something about the air in the railway station is very wrong. Sardarji had trouble to breathe. His voice was high-pitched and shaky and could hear him hiss as he tried to breathe. Everyone shouted "Run, out of the city, out of the city!" Sardarji felt tired and fell down. That was the end of his life. His body was pushed down heartlessly.

For days the people of Bhopal were on tenterhooks. Are air and water safe? Are fruits and vegetables edible? What about fish and meat? The authorities gave out limited information and only added to the confusion. They said "the water is safe, but boil it before you drink"; "the fish is safe" but promptly closed the fish and meat markets and banned the slaughter of animals. They refused to answer questions about what tests and when they had been conducted. The Bhopal Municipal Corporation, for instance, promptly declared that water was safe. But what had the water been tested for? MIC? Its derivatives? Its carcinogenic derivatives? What were the types of tests conducted? How safe was 'safe'. No effort was made to take the public into confidence. (India's Environment-1984-85)

Anjali undergoes severe mental pressure. When she is in the hospital after the tragedy (Bhopal gas leak), she sends a notice for divorce when she learns how her husband Prakash, a military man, is

wayward and has multiple affairs with women. Prakash tries to convince her that the gas had damaged her brain or something. But her resentment towards her husband increases. She threatens him with a divorce suit, citing adultery with Bela Chaudhary. Prakash is rendered speechless. Moreover, on the night of the Bhopal gas tragedy Prakash had slept peacefully while Anju had fought for her life, and she is now fighting for her son's.

Years later, she got married with Sandeep who was a professor. They were blessed with a baby "Amar" who was a question mark for everyone. Fate played a vital role in his life. Amar was physically challenged because of the consequences of Bhopal Tragedy which took place on 3rd of December, 1984. Anjali's life had a turn because of that event. She was protected from the clutches of fate. But her son made her to remember that incident so fresh.

Yes, the expected life was different from the real one. She actually married an army officer thinking that her life would be with full of parties and celebrations. But the first day itself Pradeep, her ex-husband treated her very cruelly and all the expectations were shattered down. The society itself crucified her for getting divorce from Prakash who found pleasure with different types of ladies. Even her parents blamed her.

Of course Sandeep was affectionate towards Anjali and Amar. Even Sandeep loved her parents. Sandeep hugged her and uttered "Amar is better, but he is going to get worse. He is getting worse, and I just want him to see his grandparents. "Anjali's heart broke into pieces. She knew the meaning of the sentence. The Bhopal tragedy always chased her with painful memories." No my mind protested. He wasn't going to die. I told myself I should not even think it. A miracle would happen. He would live-a normal life. It would happen. It had to happen." (Malladi,30) The consequences of the tragedy was so painful.

Meanwhile, she had to meet her ex-husband with his wife. Dreams on one side.....But reality? Again he had a visit to her school to enquire about her, which made her sister-in-law to talk ill of her. Komal Sandeep's sister was a widow and added

sufficient hardships to Anjali. "Do you think I am the maid in this house? I had to clean up after your son today. He dropped a glass of milk on the floor." (Malladi,13) Because his hands were not strong enough.

Education was far away from his reach." Amar was fascinated by stories and read as many books as he could. Every Sunday, Amar would go to the library with Sandeep or me, and we would bring back dozens of books. By the end of the week he had either read or browsed through all of them. If he was like the other children his age, he probably would go to school and learn like all normal children. But Amar couldn't go to school. Sandeep and I played the role of tutor for him. But it was difficult to impose formal education on him when he was fighting for his life.

Bhopal incident made Amar incapable of doing a lot of things. He was not able to run like other children. "Do you feel like a walk?" I asked him. We tried to get him out of the house every day, so that the sun would kiss him and he would get some fresh air. Amar got into the wheelchair and looked at me. "May I can walk today," he suggested, his eyes pleading. (Malladi,43)

He understood the limitations of his body. Yet I could see him struggle to understand why this was happening to him. Why he could not go to school like the others? And why couldn't he take a walk without feeling the life wheeze of him? The gas leak stole many people's life and still its effect affected me. It is a human tragedy as well as an environmental tragedy. Characterizing the "horrendous" tragedy as "the worst environmental disaster in history" and emphasizing that treating the injured, rehabilitating them, and providing relief to the affected families was the immediate priority, the editorial was both comprehensive and precise. It honed in on "the fact that the highly toxic methyl isocyanate continued to leak for nearly an hour and turned the neighborhood into a virtual gas chamber, made it clear that there had been an inexcusable failure to discharge the responsibility on the part of those engaged in an inherently hazardous activity." (The Hindu,21 June2010)

The mental trauma that she suffered was inexplicable. Each day she hoped that Amar was gaining strength each day she was reminded of the fact that her child had been given less than a few years to live. Anjali was not aware of the fact that the effects of that deadly night in Bhopal would lead to a child with a weak heart and weak lungs. No one had bothered to tell her that the Bhopal gas tragedy had left its mark on her womb and any child she had would be affected by that fateful night in Bhopal when so many lost their lives and so many were left wounded forever.

Even Anjali was the victim of this tragedy. She was affected by asthma. She had survived one of the worst chemical catastrophes of the century. However she had been there that night, breathing the poisonous gas. Now she struggles a lot to breathe. Her family friend Gopi suggested her that she get money if joins class action law suit against Union Carbide.

The storyline of *Enmakaje* is the endosulfan tragedy, the real incident happened in Kasargod district in Kerala. The aerial spraying of endosulfan over the cashew plantations in Kasargod started in 1978. This was done three times a year over an area covering 15 Grama panchayaths in Kasargod. There were many warning signals about its impact from the beginning, including the mass deaths of bees, fishes, frogs, birds, foxes and also congenital deformities in domestic animals like cows. Since 1979 there had been local outcry from farmers and media concerning the health effects of the pesticide spraying. In 1994, independent health observations by a local doctor, Dr. Mohan Kumar revealed that there was a rising incidence of cases of mental illness and congenital anomalies in Kasargod. He initially considered the possibility of heavy metal or radioactive toxicity of the water in the area since some of the health disorders were more in the people saying near this water sources. (Sajith. "Resistance to Endosulfan: Enmakaje as a Social Environmentalist" blogspot.blogspot.web.23sep.2016.)

She was promised to get a good amount for Amar's treatment. Her heart broke into pieces. She was not ready to receive any amount at the cost of her child. Anju got a lot of mental pressure.

Sandeep and Anjali were very much happy that they are going to give birth to a baby. They felt paradise is on the earth. But the minute she delivered the baby, he was removed to the incubator because he was not getting enough oxygen. Doctors doubted that he might have got problems with his lungs. They went from specialist to specialist and were finally told that Amar's breathing problems were related to the methyl isocyanate gas that Anjali had inhaled in the Bhopal Railway Station. Later she came to know that the symptoms of inhaling methyl isocyanate gas was infertility.

Now Amar was chained by tubes. He could understand the seriousness of his condition. Actually adults who were permitted to live the whole life fear of death. But this small one -the victim of this tragedy must be petrified and outraged at the injustice. His lungs were beyond repair and his heart was slowing down. Major Mohan had told us that it was only a matter of time, that respiratory failure was imminent.

At last Amar requested his mother that he needs some fresh air. She did not hesitate. She carefully removed the IV needle from the back of his hand and separated the electrodes, which were counting the beats of his heart, from his chest. The machine made the insidious beeping that implied death. She ignored it and carried him. He was so frail, he had been when he was a baby. She wheeled him through a small corridor and opened the door to a balcony. It was a cold morning and she covered him with the shawl. Amar felt so good but his voice was very weak.

He struggled to breath, once, twice, three, four times and then he stopped struggling. She sat there for long time holding her son's hand. She started into oblivion, her mind was blank. No thought, no emotion surfaced as she sat numbly in the cold holding her baby's hand. She was woke up from this silence when the nurse called her. Anjali smiled with a pain and replied "He wanted a breath of fresh air".

It is beautifully narrated story. Emotions, insecurities, expectations and even our culture, everything revealed in this story. She underwent many hardships such as unfaithful husband, victim of Bhopal gas tragedy, getting divorce and second marriage which led her to the peak of pain by rewarding a son fully weak and at last thrown to the hands of fate. Anjali's struggles to reconcile the roles of wife and ex-wife, working woman and mother, illuminate both the fascinating duality of the modern Indian woman and the difficult choices all women must make.

The title is very relevant till the end. The minute she inhaled the poisonous gas affected her through the life. Even it was passed to the next generation. At present, What is the condition? Are the inhabitants relieved from the problems? Who is responsible for this? Who will give justice for this issue? Is there any action not to take place such events? Will timely repair work take place to avoid such mishap? Who will give assurance for this? All these questions must be answered before we step into another new plant.

Anjali is a divorced women, a status that her culture looks down upon. Even her parents blame her for the failure of her marriage. But after trying to naively make her marriage work, Anjali is pushed to think about her own life with her first husband forgets to pick her up at the train station the night of a gas attack.

In this novel the protagonist Anjali pointed out that life is different from dreams. When she was given a life with Prakash, she was not at all happy because the handsome man committed adultery. When she was lived with her Sandeep and the sick child, she was happy. The whole life was devoted to them. Real affection given by Sandeep made her to take everything in easy way. After she comes from her school, she had to prepare food, still she did not expect this from Komal her sister-in-law. Komal made a lot nuisance for her. At times she expressed her difficulty to take care of Amar, even though she loved Amar. When Prakash visited Anjali in her school, she shouted at her by asking a lot of questions. She kept silence. Anjali shows much patience towards everyone. At the same time she showed the boldness to divorce Prakash who

committed adultery. Even her parent did not believe whatever she said and they supported Prakash. But she took firm decision and divorced him and led a life with Sandeep and Amar who loved her much. Even after meeting Prakash again she decided not to join with Prakash.

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