



## A Man Made Disaster and Denied Justice - A Film Review of 'Bhopal: A Prayer For Rain'

### KEYWORDS

disasters, union carbide, engulfed, wafted, encompasses.

**Dr. B. KALIDOSS**

Assistant Professor, Arul Anandar College, Karumathur, Madurai.

**ABSTRACT** *There are natural disasters, like tsunamis and earthquakes, cannot be predicted. And there are man-made disasters which are completely avoidable if someone has common sense to take the right call. Union Carbide (now taken over by Dow Chemicals), the multinational company from where the lethal chemicals leaked and engulfed the Bhopal city, killing thousands and maiming lakhs for life on that chilly December night, is the main theme of Bhopal: A Prayer For Rain. The story covers all the aspects of this tragedy, showing all the elements, which is responsible for this genocide.*

The medium of cinema is an enormously influential and powerful one. There are certain films which not only just awaken you, but also act as a 'mirror' to make you stand up and take notice of reality. One such film is Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain. India Today in its review of this film says "this film is a historical-drama about the world's worst industrial disaster". This was happened in 1984 when Union Carbide had flouted major safety precautions and leaked fortytonnes of a lethal gas leaving as many as 10,000 total deaths, 5,58,125 injuries out of which nearly 40,000 were permanent, the night was perhaps the worst night that Bhopal has ever witnessed.

Years later, Bhopal: A prayer for Rain has tried to bring out the agony, the pain and the suffering that more than five lakh people were exposed to on that December chilling night. The release marks the 30th anniversary of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. This film aims at looking at unanswered questions related to the story, which is widely regarded as the biggest industrial tragedy in the world, writes Mail Online India.

We see what is happening at the Bhopal plant largely through the eyes of three very different men. Dilip (RaajpalYadav) is a worker at the Union Carbide plant, with a good heart and a reluctance to question anything about the job that provides his paycheck. Motwani (Kal Penn) is a local journalist who tries to expose the truth. Kal is actually RajkumarKeswani, now a veteran journalist, who, two years before the gas tragedy, wrote a story in a weekly magazine, Rapat, titled "Bhopal jwalamukhikikagaar par (Bhopal sits on a volcano)". Warren Anderson (Martin Sheen) is the Union Carbide CEO who honestly sees himself as someone trying to provide villagers out of their ingrained poverty. And, finally, corrupted Indian ministers concerned with the elections, votes, and kept away from the plant by thick packets of money.

The film starts off with a flashback story that recalls the dreadful night of the big tragedy and all the events which led to that. The film's protagonist Dilip is a rickshaw puller by profession. He lives near the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal with his wife Leela (TannishthaChatterjee). He plays a poor man living on the margins of Bhopal. He is seen trying to pull his rickshaw with great difficulty to take his overweight passenger home. As anticipated, the rickshaw cannot bear his weight and it finally collapses. While he helps the man, a group of children decide to steal his bro-

ken wheel, leaving him with no other thing to fall back on. The broken rickshaw, poverty and the pressure of arranging wedding for his younger sister forces him to take up a work at Union Carbide, after his neighbour is killed by one drop of lethal chemical on his skin. His family's fortunes seem to improve when he gets a manual worker's job at the Union Carbide factory.

He does his job sincerely but soon finds out that the safety manager of the plant is not doing his job with honesty and flouting safety norms. People, working in the plant, start falling sick one by one, some because of the stench and others who come in contact with the liquids. Everything goes on well till the time Dilip's co-worker becomes a victim of an 'acid attack' and dies. When one of the workers dies in the factory, Dilip is picked up as his replacement and is given a uniform that he wears with great pride. The plant's lethargic and careless officer Chaudhary (Vinit Kumar) hires Dilip for the job when he is trained for it without giving him any job safety instructions. He is one of several untrained workers, one of several stop-gap measures implemented in the name of profit, and which finally backfire.

Amidst all this, the Chief Executive of Union Carbide Warren Anderson lands up in Bhopal only to 'take care' of the politicians and give the workers a pep talk. He even takes a surprise test on Dilip to know about the workers' technical knowledge. Later, the same man prefers discussing wine rather than compensation for a dead employee and glosses over his company's role in the eventual mishap. In one of the scenes, Martin Sheen who plays the CEO of Union Carbide is even seen saying 'Third world countries are always messy' as if justifying the nature of their horrific actions.

Drought has affected the crop cycle. So there is no cultivation and Indian farmers are not buying pesticide. Yet, production must be kept up, so the plant is to remain functional. Anderson visits Bhopal, asks workers to 'pray for rain'. That's the reference to the film's subtitle. There is also the allusion to a theory that had it rained on the night of the Bhopal gas tragedy, the causalities would have been much less. This remains unproven, but the film does not state it.

Then factory officials are deliberately negligent. They keep ignoring despite the pleas of the plant's lone safety officer. Workers, who poor and illiterate are in desperate condi-

tion to retain their jobs, follow instructions unquestioningly. Slowly we see the plant is creeping towards a disaster when water gets mixed with MIC (MIC is very toxic it can be absorbed not just by inhalation, but also through the skin.), when the cooling AC plant is shut down, protective gear is not provided despite pipes that are corroding, leaking. The death of a worker with just a drop of MIC and the haunting image of his widow is much disturbing.

The narrative goes up slowly winding through the lives of the people who worked at the plant, the people who are entrusted to ensure the plant's safety but failed miserably, and the top management that is keen on cutting costs, compromising the safety of not only its workers but an entire city. The film shows how the company has been slacking in term of safety procedures. The air conditioner, a crucial element to maintain the chemical's temperature as per safety protocol, is shut down as it is considered 'unnecessary expenditure'. The warning alarm in the factory is muted completely. So the factory is a sitting time bomb waiting to explode. When Dilip asks the safety officer, "Are we safe?" he replies, "wanna, keep your job".

Even though the plant's Safety Officer Roy (Joy Sengupta) handles the situation ably, he's fed up with the unprofessional and unethical attitude of the management. And when all of his repeated warnings fall on deaf ears, he decides to resign from his job. But before leaving the factory, he gives out some vital information about the hazards of the chemical plant to Dilip. He then passes on this information to the editor of 'Voice Of Bhopal' Motwani (Kal Penn), only to be published in his newspaper the next day. But unfortunately, by then, the damage is already done.

Dilip's journalist friend Motwani warns him to be careful. He has been trying hard to expose all the irregularities of Union Carbide. He relentlessly follows the story and keeps publishing them one after the other. With the help of a young American journalist he manages an interview with Warren Anderson who says they have no one to blame but themselves. When he is blamed by the journalist that he is chocking the city, he sharply replies: "the factory feeds the city".

It carefully tells the story of how, at around 12.30 am on December 3, 1984, water entered Tank E610 containing 42 tons of very deadly chemical named methyl isocyanate (MIC) starts leaking from the plant into the city of Bhopal, killing thousands of innocents. It shows how Union Carbide Corporation's CEO, Warren Anderson, reacted in 45 to 60 minutes, when about 42 metric tons of MIC vapours leaked silently into the atmosphere, the plant's warning siren was kept switched off, deliberately. On the night of Dilip's sister's marriage, what is meant to be a night of celebration for Dilip turns into his worst nightmare, the poisonous gas envelops the city and the locals are asked to flee. However, many perish before they can leave their homes.

It makes us watch what happened as clouds of toxic gases drifted through residential areas surrounding the plant, how the local hospital tried to manage with hordes of patients coughing, choking, their stinging eyes bleeding. Manoj Joshi plays Dr. Chandra who along with his limited staff and resources saved as many lives as he possible could. When the victims throng the hospital for treatment, the head doctor becomes helpless because the hospital starts running short of Sodium Hypo Chloride (the only possible way to arrest the after effects from exposure to the deadly gas).

Poor farmers who were already suffering from a drought had to bear the brunt of yet another tragedy because some of them found work in this killer factory of the Union Carbide. Dead bodies are strewn across railway tracks and hospital corridors, people jumping into dirty water to alleviate the impact of the gas but suffocating to death, children and aged people vomiting blood, the doctors and the medical staff at the government hospital struggling to cope with the onslaught of an entire city knocking at their doors. But at the UCC headquarters in America, Anderson is seen much concerned with improving the bottomline of the Bhopal plant, of selling cartons of pesticide Carbaryl. He takes pride in having set up shop in a Third-World city.

Catching up the right scene of the deaths of a number of locals within three days, this ten minute scene has all the potentials to realise the panic found in the incident. The director was successful in capturing the right picture of Bhopal city along with the aftermath of this tragedy. It is most disturbing in the manner it has shown - death among cattle, in lakes, in the hospital premises, on the railway tracks, as well as shanties and all over the roads. The scenes are horrific and disturbing, and set the panic alarm for audience in their comfortable seat. If Union Carbide, and its employees and its votaries had come together to pull the plug in time, the gas need not have leaked that night. "That would have been humane. What happened is inhumane", writes The New Indian Express in its review.

The film makes no compromises with the truth and refuses to protect those guilty of the disaster. Well, in one word, it's a worthy film for anyone who is keen to get the insight about the Bhopal gas tragedy occurred way back in 1984. The director has left no stone unturned to show the downside of India along with pinpointing the arrogance of American corporate that had the business of death in the name of carbide in the city of Bhopal. At one end, we can find arrogant American MNC dealing with the union carbide issue in a very callous manner, while on the other end; the movie shows corrupted politicians who are simply interested in filling up their pockets for their own vested interests. It exposes the politico-corporate nexus, corporate's greed for profit by cutting costs and the propaganda that the gas MIC is safe by all the vested interests. This film is a must watch to know the plight of Bhopal residents, who are still fighting for justice.

## REFERENCE

Bhopal: A prayer for Rain@ www.solarmovie.ws | Mail Online India, December 6, 2014 | The Hindu, December 5, 2014 | The New Indian Express, December 5, 2014