

# Amma, Bhopal

Yash Gupta

2nd December, 1984

## Poison gas leak-out hits 2 lakh • Worst-ever tragedy in Bhopal

Fig. 1, FPJ Web Desk.

**B**lowing off the dust gathered on some thirty-nine-year-old newspapers, I could not help but wonder when

someone would rub off the grime that has been settling on Bhopal since 1984. There is too much rust on tank E610,

brittle enough to crack under the heft of piling medical reports.

### Toxic water found around UCC plant

Fig. 2, Sarvadarshi.

**Ramkali Gupta.**  
Bhopal, Dec 2, 1984

Some stains are difficult to purge. Haldi. Ink. Methyl isocyanate. I have tried soaking them in the numerous lakes that dot Bhopal; in the several gas scars that flow across my Amma's back, like a river changing states: gas, liquid, ash.

My Amma was the oldest thing I knew in Bhopal; wrinkly faced, arched body, a smile broken only by customary inhaler breaks; her legs swollen like the fingers of a fisherman returning with toxic catch from a toxic lake – the water deemed “unfit for human consumption” after some tragedy initiated by global figures who died peaceful deaths; a city deemed unfit for human existence.

And so, Amma could not walk; a fixture in a small room tucked away in some small corner of Bhopal. This was the only place where I could find my wrinkly-faced Amma, my bent-as-a-bow grandmother.

### More MIC stock in Carbide plant than assessed Anderson released

Fig. 3, gv2k; Fig. 4, gv2k.

## 25 years and still waiting

The Anderson saga is one more reminder that the powerful can always count on official help.

Fig. 5, gv2k.

**Yash Gupta.**  
Münster, Dec. 5, 2023

I did not know much about my Amma, Bhopal. Neither the giant Hawelis, nor Saanchi. Neither her upbringing nor her life. They have always been a part of my environment – Narbada Restaurant & Sweets, her walking stick, Taj-ul-Masjid, Smile Dental Clinic, her Urobag – and so I never felt the need to know them.

But Amma was very much like tank E610 in her last few years; her mouth left slightly

ajar, anticipating water to quench her cracked tongue that had been gathering silences for 39 years. Her responses would rarely progress beyond grunts and looks that would slide over the contours of my face; so we pretended that her groans, that the silences that accompanied her long stares had some meaning to them.

Tau, my father's older brother, had always been a transient being. He was always actively absent from not only our lives but also from Amma's.

Hospitalisations, festivals, and anniversaries had been celebrated without him. However, in the two years leading up to Amma's death, he began visiting her, announced only by his groaning scooter, which would keep coughing long after it had been switched off. Punctually, once per month. His presence was not demanding – no Chai or biscuits, perhaps a glass of water. And then, sleep. He would come and sleep next to his mother, possibly exhausted from playing adults. No discussions, no formalities, just a quick nap. His presence was discernible only by the few snack packets he would leave behind for his mother.

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## Gas victims stage indefinite dharna

Fig. 6, Graph Paper Press.

**Ramkali Gupta.**  
Bhopal, *undated*

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Many seasons ago, Amma was the scent of a seemingly unending summer; the thick fragrance of ghee that would waft through the whole house, the sharp sting of roasted chillies that would spice giant vats of homemade pickle, and the pungent savour of Hing-tinged Sabzis that would carry promises of abundance.

I wonder what she would have said if she saw me scrubbing the smell of *Indisches Kochen* (Ger. 'Indian cooking') off my skin every time I step out of the ten-metre squared room I call home now. Some scents

are difficult to carry, no matter how much they may be embedded in your being.

2nd- 3rd December, 1984

## Exodus from Bhopal in new scare wave

Fig. 7, gv2k.

**Yash Gupta.**  
Münster, 19th May, 1999

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Each year, on December 2, the same face – iconic – would pop up on school notice boards. My two eyes, one deep brown, the other crystallised into a lunar cataract, would meet another pair. A child's face suspended in dirt – no body, no hands – another rock that Bhopalis stumble upon in their path towards forgetting. This anniversary, it seems, is the only day when the Bhopal Gas Tragedy crosses the Bhopali mind. The two days or arguably countless years condensed into a two-minute read.

And yet, when I moved to Pune or Mumbai, I found myself clinging to its recognition. The tragedy preceded my arrival, and I was told, as if I was yet to grow into my inheritance, that my Bhopal, my Amma, had been decimated long ago. And perhaps I did find solace in my city's tragedy. The solace that I was already known in this new city, however distortedly.

Since I was a child, I had wished to escape Bhopal – its undulating architecture, its



Fig. 8, Deccan Herald.

noisy traffic that would customarily flout red lights, its spaces where the smells of gas and masalas would intertwine. I left Bhopal five years ago. I returned six days before Amma left us.

It is uncanny to know a body, but no longer the person who resides in it.

On July 7, 2022, a day before Amma's death, her mouth cracked into a smile. Her last word was "Karthik"

Amma passed away before her sole dream of travelling in an aeroplane could be fulfilled. Amma passed away before I could have stained the geometric streets of Germany with her memories, before I could saturate the clouds from the white of her stark hair, before I could sweeten the first blooms of spring with her stories.

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# Gas leak at Union Carbide

Fig. 9, Doyle.

**Ramkali Gupta.**  
Bhopal, July 8, 2022

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Tau is visibly a decaying man. The tragedy caught up with him much sooner than age did.

I would often wonder why he sought only to sleep next to his mother while she peered over him as if he was born just yesterday. Maybe if he just slept, ignored all the years, ignored the dust settling on his mother, and maybe if he dropped the reality-affirming chat of, "How is it with you, these days?" he could ignore

the fact that it was too late. And perhaps he knew it too. Each time he returned, she was not the same mother. She was older, more decrepit.

Amma was very much like the city, ignored. I was very much like Tau, late.

I often find myself returning to Bhopal in behaviours, discussions, and making sense of the new. It is often disorienting to wake up and find myself no longer in Bhopal.

Comfort and belonging are tricky things. We assume that the things we cherish, those who raise us, our cities, our Ammas, will linger; that their memories are safe somewhere in our psyche, somewhere awaiting a leak, a few drops of water to envelope us. Somehow, the dust on the newspapers does not seem so bad. And for those who have deluded themselves into an eternal Amma, like my Tau and I, the only solace lies in curling next to her. No discussions, no formalities, just a quick nap.

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## Appendix

Fig 1. FPJ Web Desk, "On This Day in History! December 3, 1984 – Deadly 'Bhopal Gas tragedy' leads to death of 3,787 people" *Free Press Journal*. 3 Dec. 2018.  
<https://www.freepressjournal.in/cmcm/on-this-day-in-history-december-3-1984-deadly-bhopal-gas-tragedy-leads-to-death-of-3787-people>

Fig 2. Sarvadarshi, "Poison Police" *Bhopal.net*. 27 Nov. 2002.  
[https://www.bhopal.net/old\\_bhopal\\_web/oldsite/peoplevpoison.html](https://www.bhopal.net/old_bhopal_web/oldsite/peoplevpoison.html)

Fig 3. Gv2k, "Bhopal Gas: A Lethal Trade Secret" *My Take by GVK*. 30 Nov. 2009.  
<https://gvk2.wordpress.com/category/bhopal/>

Fig 4. Gv2k, "Bhopal 1984 and Anderson Saga" *My Take by GVK*. 2 Dec. 2009.  
<https://gvk2.wordpress.com/category/bhopal/>

Fig 5. Gv2k, "Bhopal 1984 and Anderson Saga" *My Take by GVK*. 2 Dec. 2009.  
<https://gvk2.wordpress.com/category/bhopal/>

Fig 6. Graph Paper Press, "After the Gas: newspaper cuttings from the Sambhavna Document Library collection" *The Bhopal Marathon*.  
<http://www.bhopalmarathon.org/after-the-gas-newspaper-cuttings-and-photographs/>

Fig 7. Gv2k, "Bhopal Gas: A Lethal Trade Secret" *My Take by GVK*. 30 Nov. 2009.  
<https://gvk2.wordpress.com/category/bhopal/>

Fig. 8. Deccan Herald, "Bhopal gas tragedy: NGOs cry foul over 'secret' waste disposal." 17 Aug. 2015.  
<https://www.deccanherald.com/content/495672/bhopal-gas-tragedy-ngos-cry.html>

Fig. 9. Doyle, Jack, "Wire service stories on Union Carbide's August 1985 gas leak in West Virginia appeared in various U.S. newspapers." *The Pop History Dig*. 5 April 2019.  
<https://www.pophistorydig.com/topics/tag/bhopal-disaster-1984/>