



# The Morality of Memory

by Rama Lakshmi

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A city of lakes in the heart of India is now the site of one of the most important debates about memory and museums in contemporary India. As Bhopal grapples with the memory of one of its most traumatic episodes in recent history, the issues that emerge reflect the central debates not only of the rise of 21<sup>st</sup> century India but also of its museums.

## The Bhopal Disaster

Almost 27 years ago, 42 tons of the poisonous methyl isocyanate gas escaped from the American pesticide factory Union Carbide in Bhopal. It killed about 4,000 people in the first few days, and eventually left over 14,000 dead. It has been called the world's worst industrial disaster, and residents say that even today, more than 100,000 people continue to suffer from chronic illnesses tied to the incident, including cancer, birth disorders, tuberculosis, depression, poor eyesight, and gynecological problems.

The battle for justice that the Bhopal gas tragedy survivors have waged—for adequate compensation, continued health care, toxic clean-up, corporate liability—is the second longest-running people's movement in independent India. It has dramatically changed neighborhoods, networks, relationships and identities of the survivors, most of whom are very poor. What happened that fateful night in Bhopal in 1984, and the 26 years of angry, valiant struggle is now an inalienable part of India's collective memory.

And yet, how and what we remember of the Bhopal story is contested territory. Now, a new question about who has the right to remember exposes the critical

issues at the heart of the politics of memorials. The survivors believe they have the right.

For some years now, I have been advocating and writing about the need to re-imagine museums in India to include contemporary social histories and people's movements. Some of Bhopal's survivor groups have enlisted me to help curate their life stories and struggles. The following is a reflection on some of the key questions that arise when creating a memorial to contested history.

## Moral Witnesses and Memory

In 2005, the Madhya Pradesh state government, of which Bhopal is the capital city, awarded the \$25 million grand memorial and museum project, after a national competition, to a New Delhi-based architectural firm called Space Matters.

But some Bhopal survivors ask a very powerful question: Who has the moral right to build a memorial and a museum at the abandoned Union Carbide factory site? They say that the government does not have the right because it is complicit in the injustice that has been dished out to them. In fact, they say, only the survivors, who are the moral witnesses, possess that right.

For many years, survivors' groups have demanded that the government give land, money, and all the help required for creating a memorial and a museum. But they also sought the right to imagine and shape it. Any act of remembering that is different from the survivors' lived experience has the potential to break up the memory community that binds them

together. In their eyes, the government cannot be a legitimate claimant of the memory project.

Over the past 26 years there have been a number of commemorative acts:

- A city hospital displays rows of twisted fetuses of unborn children aborted by pregnant women fleeing from the poisonous gas.
- In 1985, a tall sculpture of a wailing lady with an infant was built by an artist from the Netherlands, Ruth Waterman, a child survivor of the Holocaust.
- In 2004, for the 20th anniversary, some survivors organized a solemn, temporary exhibition called Yaad-e-Haadsa (Memory of the Accident) at a campaign office. Framed photographs of some of the dead, along with their objects, were placed on a long table in the center of the room. The exhibition was marked by an absence of textual narrative.

But memory is never uniformly shared. A cultural autopsy of the site reveals many layers of shared and unshared past. Whose memory? Whose version? Who builds memorials and museums? These questions reveal the political landmines that lie in the process of remembering Bhopal. How we answer these questions will help us frame not only the kind of museum Bhopal will have, but also radically re-configure the prevalent museum landscape in India. It will also influence the manner in which India's countless people's movements view themselves.



*Photo taken in the days immediately following the disaster. Many survivors suffered damage to eyesight and thronged the ill-equipped city hospitals in thousands. Photo by Prakash Hatvalne. Courtesy of <http://bhopal.bard.edu/resources/visual.shtml>.*

### **Memorial as Display of Power**

Creating a memorial is an indicator of power. In most cases, the government has the power to enact commemorative rituals—street names, public holidays, memorials, and museums. Bhopal survivors view the government's plan—approving a memorial design without the active participation of all the survivors' groups—as reflective of the prevailing hierarchy. They accuse the government of allowing Union Carbide's former chairman Warren Anderson to go free, and not pursuing his extradition in earnest; for secretly negotiating an out-of-court "settlement" with Carbide in 1989; and for the way in which compensation was decided and distributed. Some survivors fear that the government may build a sedate and safe memorial.

### **The Government Memorial**

The project design of Space Matters is centered around the theme of "remembrance, healing and deterrence" and seeks to regenerate the trauma site by creating a trail that will visually reconnect the rusting and stigmatized factory to the rest of the city. It also includes breaking down the boundary wall that surrounds the factory grounds. The wall has been used by activists for writing protest graffiti over the years. At its core, the memorial will be a glass cube encasing

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Survivors and their families have been protesting the lack of adequate compensation and attention to the tragedy over the last 26 years. In 2001 Dow Chemical acquired Union Carbide, and survivors demand that Dow clean up the toxic site and contaminated groundwater. Photo by Maude Dorr. Courtesy of <http://bhopal.net/photos.html>.

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the plinths of the factory, and a light shaft at the foot of the factory. The goal is to create a contemplative space.

A museum will be built in a manner that does not disturb the factory site. It will feature a series of exhibitions focusing on the tragedy, plight, and the resurgence of the victims. The museum, says the firm, will also develop learning opportunities about industrial security and sustainable development, and conduct research on the co-existence of industry and ecology. The “urban void” at the trauma site, it says, will now have a community space, youth center and a playground. Moulshri Joshi, of Space Matters, says that their memorial design “seeks to give back to the city what the tragedy took away from it, and trigger social catharsis.”

### The Abandoned Factory

The government’s memorial project, however, cannot take off until there is a legal resolution on the issue of the clean-up of the toxic chemicals lying at the factory that have seeped into the underground water. The matter is part of a court battle. The government suggested dismantling the rusting remains of the factory and treating the chemical waste and contaminated underground water. But survivors say that the clean-up is the responsibility of Dow Chemical, which has said that it never owned or operated the factory. Survivors say that when Dow acquired Union Carbide, it inherited the liabilities too, and the government must not spend Indian taxpayers’ money for the clean-up.

The abandoned plant is also an important historic artifact and should be conserved as “a living memorial to the disaster that informs present and future generations about the worst corporate massacre in world history,” said a statement of five survivor organizations in February 2010. “Any move to dismantle the factory structure will face the wrath of the victims,” said Nawab Khan, a survivor. In Bhopal, any memorial plan on the factory site is directly related to the resolution of the pending issues in the movement.

### Survivors’ Plan—A Curatorial Opportunity for India

At a conference organized by Space Matters earlier this year in Bhopal, some architects said that a memorial at the site should be a serene, introspective space that is also apolitical. But others asked if the commemoration of a site that engendered a long legacy of activism can be devoid of politics.

## A cultural autopsy of the site reveals many layers of shared and unshared past. Whose memory? Whose version?

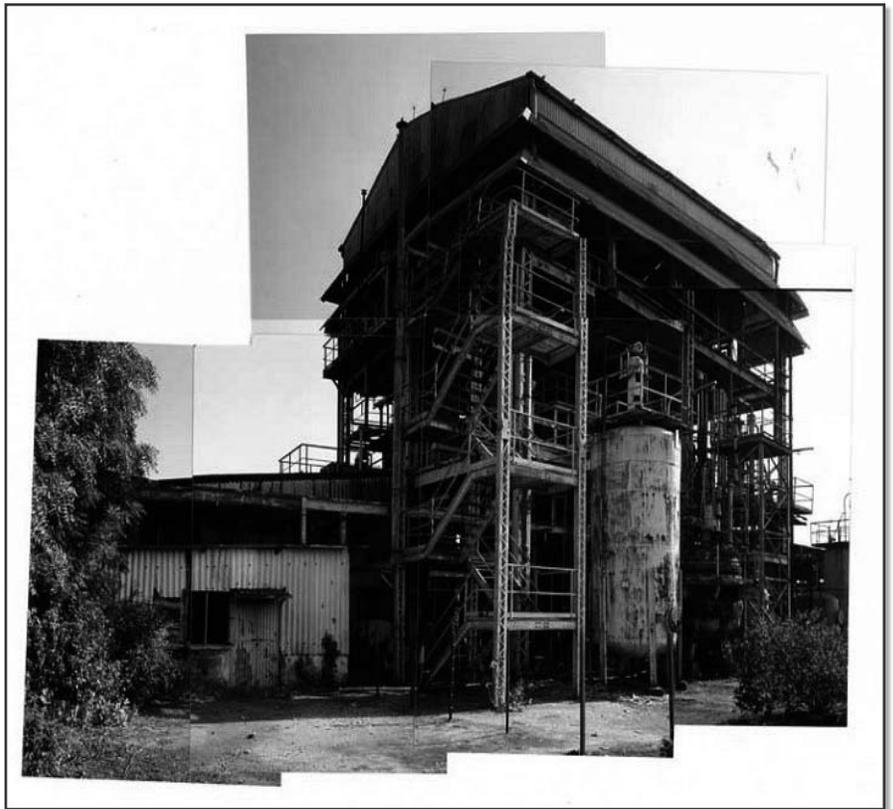
The Bhopal story presents a unique, first-ever opportunity to recast the Indian museum universe, which is dominated by celebratory, nationalist stories. They are conceived as tools for chest-thumping, prideful patriotism. They do not delve into people's struggles or troubling social questions, and have no voice in public discourse. A memorial and a museum at the Union Carbide site must speak to the ongoing arguments that contemporary India is having with itself—around frenetic industrial growth, displacement of communities and traditional livelihoods, and environmental protection.

Since January this year, seven survivors' groups, connected to the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, are developing their own exhibition, which they hope will become a separate, permanent museum in Bhopal by 2014. Through this endeavor, the survivors hope to take back the narrative control: they are raising funds, donating objects, and shaping the content. In the process, they hope to create a template not only for the government memorial to emulate, but also for other people's movements who can begin preserving their stories and objects.

The exhibition will be set in a bus, which will travel across India during 2012 to other sites of local struggles against toxic waste, industrial pollution, and health hazards. Many of these battles look to the strategies and tactics of the Bhopal movement for inspiration. Survivors hope that the bus-exhibition will energize other movements. When the bus returns to Bhopal in 2014, the work to build a permanent survivors' museum will begin. They do not have a site yet; it will depend

on how much money they can raise to buy or rent land. They may situate it in one of the neighborhoods around the factory. The factory site, after all, belongs to the government.

The bus exhibition will focus not only on the trauma but also the movement that turned victims into warriors. Their long



*The abandoned factory that is both a toxic site and a historical artifact. Photo by Maude Dorr. Courtesy of <http://bhopal.net/photos.html>.*

struggle is what empowers the survivors today. An exhibition cannot rob them of agency by objectifying them forever as tragic victims. The exhibition will be angry, edgy, and political. It will not

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hesitate to name the officials, politicians, and businesses that have let the survivors down. In the hands of the survivors, the exhibition will become one more campaign tool.

“We have fought this battle for 26 years and got very little. Our story and our movement is a lesson for others. That's all we are now—a lesson,” said Rasheeda Bee, a survivor and winner of the 2004 Goldman Award for outstanding services to the environment. “A true memorial is one that lets us tell our stories of anger, bitterness, tears, and courage.”

For the exhibition, researcher-scholar Shalini Sharma and I are conducting a series of oral history interviews with survivors, activists, witnesses, factory workers, and officials. We have also recorded poems, protest songs, and slogans that have emerged out of the movement. Some of the objects of deep personal memory, donated by the survivors, include a frock of a little girl who died that night, a carpenter's last work, spectacles, bridal clothes of a woman who died, a little boy's pencil box, a *mangalsutra* (a wedding necklace) of a bride who died, and the last gift of a sari from a husband to the wife. These objects are the last tangible link of the

survivors to the dead persons. Protest banners, posters, and props will also be displayed, along with the taped voices of the survivors.

When I took permission from the activists to write this article, they expressed the hope that readers will help collect artifacts from international Union Carbide facilities and neighborhoods for the Bhopal museum.

### Conclusion

For now, it appears that there will eventually be more than one museum about the Bhopal tragedy. When there are competing narratives about an event, fragmented, multiple commemorations abound. Fixed and definitive memorials are difficult when people are pitted against their governments in a daily battle for justice.

Therein lies the biggest challenge for Indian museums at a time when the country is going through tremendous transformative social, economic, and political churning. But our museums, pre-occupied with being post-cards of cultural pride, are disengaged from the India of a million mutinies and social anxieties. The opportunity that Bhopal presents us must not be lost. ✨



A watch donated to the prospective survivors' museum by one of the survivor families. Photo by Rama Lakshmi.

A more detailed article addressing the survivors' project will be in the forthcoming issue of *Curator* (55.1), online the first week of January 2012. The Editor