



# CHAMBER OF GAS



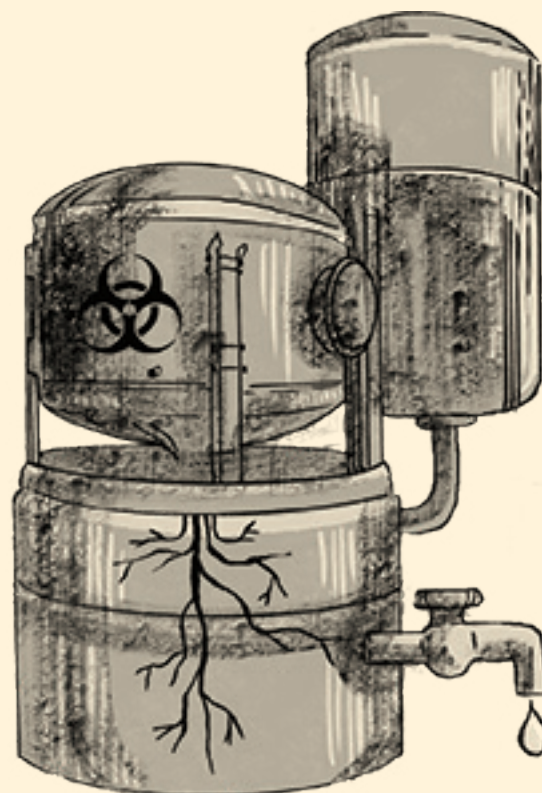
On the night of 2 December 1984, a defective tank at the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, India, began leaking 27 tonnes of deadly methyl isocyanate gas into the air. None of the six safety systems designed to contain such a leak were operational in the plant, allowing the gas to spread throughout the city of Bhopal.

By morning, half a million people were exposed to the gas. More than 3,000 people died in the immediate aftermath of the disaster and 25,000 have died to date. More than 120,000 people still suffer from ailments caused by the accident and the subsequent pollution at the plant site. These ailments include blindness, extreme difficulty in breathing, gynaecological disorders, cancers and birth deformities.

Many people relate to the gas leak as the only disaster from the Union Carbide plant; however for fifteen years before the gas disaster the company had routinely dumped highly toxic chemical wastes inside and outside its factory site.

After the catastrophic gas leak, the factory was locked up and left to rot, with all the chemicals and wastes still there.

Union Carbide left the factory and its surroundings without cleaning them and, as a result, the remaining chemicals slowly leaked into the earth, further contaminating the soil and groundwater. Those living around the site continued to drink water from wells and pumps, unaware of the deadly poisons they contained.



For the longest time the government denied the issue of water contamination; this issue was brought to the attention of the public and the officials by the health activists at Sambhavna Clinic, a health facility dedicated to providing free health care to survivors of the Bhopal gas disaster.

The health researchers at the clinic documented severe health effects like skin problems, reproductive issues, birth deformities and cancers among residents who were not exposed to the gas but were drinking groundwater from around the factory site.



When local groundwater and well-water testing was done in 1999, chemicals known to cause cancer, brain damage and birth defects were found in levels that were thousands of times above the safe limits.

The public health researchers actively disseminated this data among the affected populations, governmental agencies and courts. Subsequently the government was forced to accept the water contamination issue, and the Supreme Court of India gave orders to the state government to supply clean drinking water to the affected populations.



It was the systematic documentation, evidence generation and active dissemination of it by the public health researchers that led to the recognition of the problem, and without it thousands of families would still be drinking Union Carbide's poisons.