

My Amma, Bhopal

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

Fig. 1, FPJ Web Desk

Blowing 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.

Poison gas toll 1,200 and rising

Fig. 2, Doyle

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

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.

25 years and still waiting

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

Fig. 5, gv2k

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

Yash Gupta
Münster, May 28, 2023

I did not know much about my Amma, Bhopal. Not the giant Hawelis, or 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 – I have 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.

Widespread scare about after-effects

Fig. 6, gv2k

Ramkali Gupta
Bhopal, undated

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* 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.

Exodus from Bhopal in new scare wave

Fig. 7, gv2k

Yash Gupta
Münster, 19th May, 1999

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 perhaps I was already known this new city, however distortedly.

Since I was a child, I wished to escape Bhopal – its undulating architecture, its noisy traffic that would customarily flout red lights, its spaces where gas



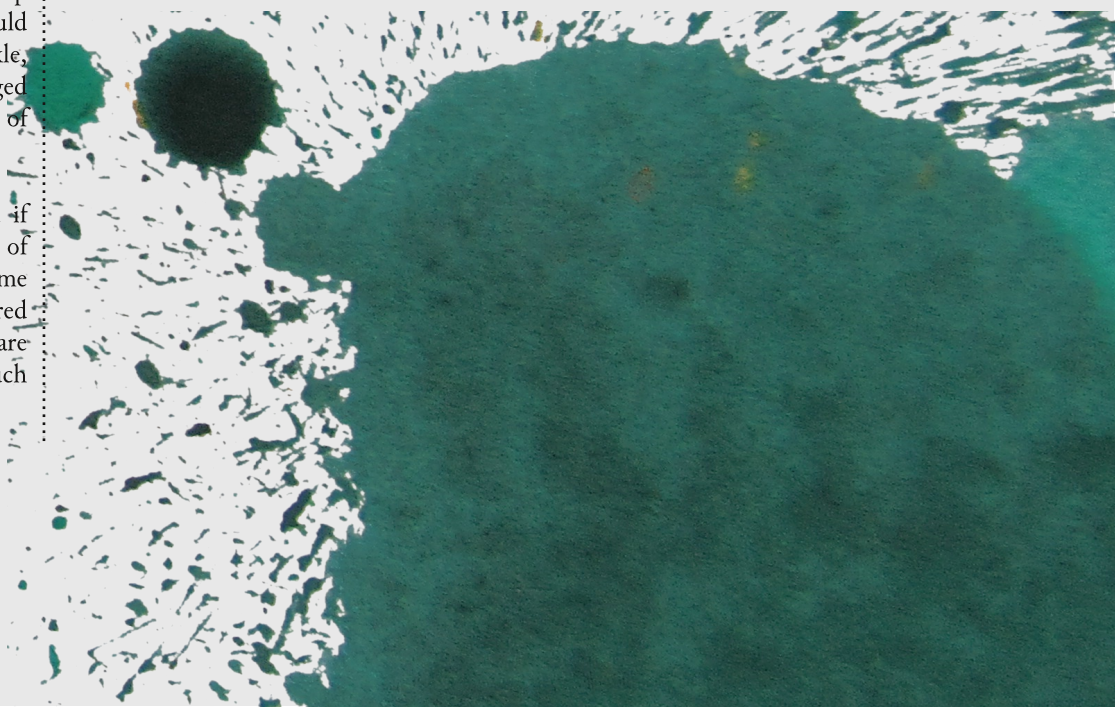
Fig. 8, Deccan Herald

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.



Gas leak at Union Carbide

Fig. 9, Doyle

Ramkali Gupta
Bhopal, July 8, 2022

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

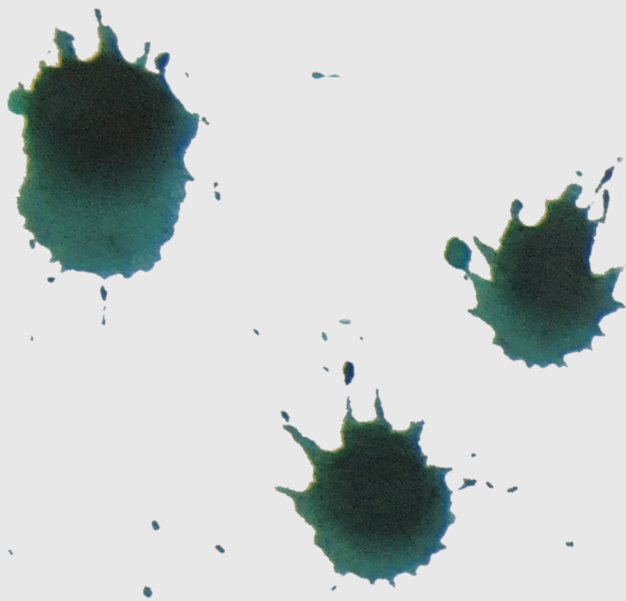
I would often wonder why he sought only to sleep next to his mother while she peered over him as if he was born just yesterday. Maybe if he just slept, ignored all the years, ignored the dust settling on his mother, and maybe if he dropped the reality-affirming chat of, "How is it with

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.



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 December 2018. <https://www.freepressjournal.in/cmcm/on-this-day-in-history-december3-1984-deadly-bhopal-gas-tragedyleads-to-death-of-3787-people>.

Fig. 2. Doyle, Jack. “December 5th 1984 edition of The Hindustan Times of India with early reporting on the Bhopal gas leak disaster.” *The Pop History Dig*. 5 April 2019. <https://www.pophistorydig.com/topics/tag/bhopal-disaster-1984>.

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

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

Fig 5. Ibid.

Fig 6. Ibid.

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

Fig. 8. DHNS. “Bhopal gas tragedy: NGOs cry foul over ‘secret’ waste disposal.” *Deccan Herald*. 17 August 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>.

Yash Gupta is a graduate student at the University of Münster, currently enrolled in the Master’s programme in National and Transnational Studies. He also holds a Bachelor’s degree in Literary and Cultural Studies with a minor in Graphic Design, and a diploma in Fine Arts.

As a first-generation student with multiple disabilities, his work engages with resonances of non/human differences expressed in the disciplines of Death Studies, Critical South Asian Studies, Digital Humanities and Disability Studies, along with Gender & (A)sexuality Studies, practice-based Animal & Environmental Studies, and Oral History; reflected in his chapter contributions in *Literary Representations of Pandemics, Epidemics and Pestilence* (2022), *Media Technology and Cultures of Memory* (2023) and *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* (Anniversary Edition) (Forthcoming, 2024).

As a student of design, his creative works fuse textual and visual components to express concerns of passing, remembrance, and dis/abling inheritance, particularly in the context of lived experiences.