

# The bhopal gas tragedy: an ethical study essay sample



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## Introduction

This paper is written on the facts behind the Gas Tragedy that occurred in Bhopal, India, in 1984 when tons of lethal gases escaped from the Union Carbide factory, instantaneously killing around eight thousand people and poisoning thousands others who continue lives with the after effects of gas poisoning to this day.

(<http://www.corporatenarc.com/dowchemicalscandal.php>)

Through this paper we discuss the unethical approach of the Union Carbide factory in maintaining and practicing care and safety where storage of huge quantities of poisonous gas is concerned. We overview the company's reaction to the accident, and judge the motives of the corporate after the tragedy occurred.

## Brief Background of the company - Union Carbide Corporation

The Union Carbide factory was established well before Indian Independence, in the year 1917. It boasts of the first filed patent (1919) for the commercial production of ethylene. The sixties saw the company expanding hugely into mining division as well as electronics and hydrocarbons divisions. Since 2001 it is completely taken over by the Dow Chemical Company. The company always denied that the 1984 accident was in fact an accident, and that it was in fact a planned sabotage! More on that later... The tragedy was, according to the company's website, the only black mark in its ninety year existence on Indian soil. (<http://www.unioncarbide.com/history/index.htm>)

## Synopsis of the Tragedy in 1984

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In the early morning hours of December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1984, a deadly gas called Methyl Isocyanate escaped from the Union Carbide Corporation Factory at Bhopal, India. Six safety systems were available on premises of the factory, which were designed to eliminate the risk of such a leak, but not one of them was operational on the night on Dec 2. Thousands of people in Bhopal, many living in slums surrounding the factory were exposed to the gas, and the accident has claimed around 20, 000 lives to date. Over a hundred thousand survivors live with post-accident ailments such as difficulty in breathing, eye problems and gynecological disorders, to this day. The site has never really been detoxicated, and dangerous levels of mercury are constantly reported in the ground water in Bhopal. A Michigan based corporate giant called Dow chemicals purchased the company in 2001. Unfortunately, they too have not made attempts to detoxicate the area and neither have they consented to providing the formula of the gas which had leaked, to medical personnel. This formula is vital to finally help the survivors find a permanent cure to their ailments.

The Union Carbide factory was losing money in the eighties. In fact it had virtually stopped production of pesticide in the year 1980; however dangerous chemicals remained on location since then. About sixty tones of methyl isocyanines, or MIC as it is widely known, was present on location at the factory. The management at the factory didn't quite keep the security levels required for storage up to date. In fact the state of the factory was in such shambles that when a worker was trying to flush out a pipe with water, a series of stop cocks and valves failed consecutively, which allowed a huge amount of water to enter the largest container holding MIC. This caused a

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huge and vigorous reaction of chemicals, which burst out of the cement storage tank, breaking its top open. A deadly gas cloud of MIC was formed, which remained low in altitude. Winds prevalent in the area caused it to spread over a major part of the city of Bhopal. The rest as they say is history and people continued to suffer with ailments, to say the least. The children of mothers who were exposed to the gas are sometimes born with terrible birth disorders till today. The shocking part is this; the factory refused to pay compensation to the victims and their families until 1989, five years after the accident, and even when they did (around 300USD to each), it was following the orders from the Indian Supreme Court.

(<http://www.bhopal.org/whathappened.html>)

An NGO called Greenpeace has been working for the betterment of Bhopal gas victims for a few years. Thanks to their efforts the Bhopal government charged Me Anderson, the then CEO of Union Carbide, with manslaughter. He evaded the police, and no one seemed to care to try and find him. Greenpeace managed to locate him in 2001, living a luxurious life in the Hampton. Neither the US nor the Indian authorities seem to however care to make efforts to extradicate and try him for his negligence.

Key Ethical issues involved

1. The accident, as it is widely considered, or the 'sabotage' as Union Carbide claims – in either case it was because of negligence on the company's part, be it a question of poor maintenance or be it a question of poor security.

2. The Company refused to pay the victims and their families compensation for the damage they had caused, until they were ordered to do so in the year 1989, by the supreme court of India (the highest court in India)
3. Union Carbide conveniently sold out to Dow chemicals in 2001, and Dow say they can not be held responsible since they were not the ruling authority in 1984. The victims are left without anyone to blame!
4. Neither Union Carbide nor Dow care to share the formula of the gas that leaked in 1984. This formula could be vital to help treat survivors for their disorders.
5. The factory has never been de-toxicated either by Union Carbide or by Dow. The dangerous mercury levels in the city of Bhopal's water supply remain to this day.
6. The CEO of the Union Carbide plant, Mr. Warren Anderson is charged with manslaughter by the India government. He continues to live a life of luxury in New York State. Neither the Indian nor US governments care to bring him to task for his negligence.

[http://www. greenpeace. org/international/news/justice-for-warren-anderson](http://www.greenpeace.org/international/news/justice-for-warren-anderson)

These are only some of the unethical facts about the gas tragedy of 1984. The only compensation that the victims or their families have received over these many years is 300-500 US dollars a piece. A princely sum for a lifetime of suffering!

The Organization's Unethical Reaction to Events

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Union Carbide may rightly be called an unethical corporate company. They did not bother to secure their dangerous chemicals in 1984. They did not make amends to the victims till they were forced to by the government of India. They, to date, refuse to share the formula of the deadly gas that escaped in 1984. This is unethical behavior to say the very least. NGOs began pressing down on them in the late nineties, and the management conveniently sold out to a Michigan based company called Dow in 2001. Dow says they cannot be held responsible, and the victims now have nowhere to turn.

### Conclusion

The Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984 is definitely one of the deadliest tragedies of all time. People were killed without any warning of what was to happen to them that night. From the above writings it is evident that the Union Carbide company has displayed the most unethical of reactions to their negligence. Victims continue to demand their justice till today, while neither the Indian nor the US governments come to their aid. This leads one to believe there is an almost uncanny fate to these people's lives that remains unexplained to this day. However, an NGO called Greenpeace continues to work for the betterment of these people. Hopefully, one day the corporate will at least part with the formula of the deadly gas, which will no doubt help medical personnel to better treat its victims. Up to now, it can surely be said, that neither Union Carbide nor Dow has shown any motive to help the people of the 1984 tragedy. ([http://www. studentsforbhopal. org/Quotes. htm](http://www.studentsforbhopal.org/Quotes.htm))

### References

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And Justice will be done?

Sept 11, 2007

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