

Bhopal gas tragedy: 24 years on, the trauma continues

Twenty-four years have passed since the world's worst man-made disaster - [Bhopal](#) gas tragedy - occurred. But despite the passage of time the trauma continues for the survivors of that fateful night of Dec 2-3, 1984, when over 40 tonnes of methyl isocyanate (MIC) spewed out of the now defunct Union Carbide's pesticide plant here.

Having borne the brunt of neurological, hormonal and mental health problems - besides the economic hardships - the survivors are now faced with the problem of deformed children being born.

Children of affected parents conceived and born after the disaster were significantly different from children of the same age born to unexposed parents, says a study carried out by Sambhavna Trust that runs a clinic to treat the gas-affected people.

'Such children were shorter, thinner, lighter and had smaller heads. Also, children of exposed parents showed abnormal growth of upper part of their bodies - disproportionately smaller than their lower bodies,' says the study.

Medical research is desperately needed specially into the possible genetic and reproductive after-effects of the lethal gas leak that killed over 3,000 people instantly and thousands more over years later.

But the genetic damage to the children - born to survivors - has been severely under-studied, allege rights activists. This has led to 'unsystematic treatment of gas victims already faced with neurological, hormonal and mental health problems', they say.

Lack of research - into the possible genetic and reproductive ramifications of exposure to lethal gasses and now to contaminated water - has seriously marred efforts to check the effects of poisonous gases on the next generation of the affected.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) initiated 18 studies in the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster. However, despite findings of long-term damage, these studies were all prematurely ended within 10 years, that too at a time when the evidence of damage on the offspring of survivors was beginning to show.

ICMR studies, though terminated prematurely, did show that children of exposed mothers had delayed physical and mental development.

'Most studies done by the ICMR were terminated as early as 1989 and the rest by 1994 without reviewing the collected data, and pleas for continuing the studies were ignored. The ICMR's full report on Bhopal too has not been released till date,' said Satinath Sarangi, who runs Sambhavna Trust.

There have been no large-scale official studies on the effects of this chemical exposure on children born to exposed parents despite the children facing very high rates of serious congenital health problems.

The Fact Finding Mission on Bhopal found high levels of chemicals in the breast milk of the affected

women. Studies conducted by the Sambhavna Trust Clinic indicated that about half of the people living in the contaminated area were suffering from multiple symptoms.

'Children suffering congenital deformities continue to be denied medical attention. Only 14 children received official assistance for heart surgery and 13 assistance in diagnosis for congenital brain anomalies between 1992 and 1997, under the programme SPARC (Special Assistance to At-Risk Children). But it was suddenly withdrawn in 1997 citing financial constraints,' said Rashida Bi of the Chingari Trust that is working for gas survivors.

'There are an unusually large numbers of children with cerebral palsy too in the communities affected by gas or contaminated groundwater,' she claimed, lamenting that between 1984 and 2000, the government spent just Rs.3,761 per year per child orphaned by the disaster.

And this despite the fact that an amount of Rs.497 million was allocated for social rehabilitation of victims of the disaster in 1986, she said.

Sanjay Sharma (© IANS / India eNews)