Torture me

REPORT BY INDRA SINHA

LACCHO SITS IN THE DOOR of her house, cradling a garment that belonged to her daughter. She is speaking, but what she's saying, no one can tell. She'll break into song, give a little laugh. Sometimes, she cries.

'She's been like this for years,' says a neighbour. 'All day sitting in the doorway, holding that cloth, talking to God or whoever will listen.'

Hearing voices, Laccho turns and surveys us with empty eyes, then gives us a toothless and unexpectedly sweet smile. To look at you would think she was in her eighties, not her forties.

Laccho was born in Bhopal in 1958. At sixteen she was married to Laxmi Narayan, a hotel waiter. There was never enough money. Laccho earned a few rupees rolling leaf cigarettes but the couple were always hungry. Having no money to buy a hut, they built a shack of planks near the fine new American factory that had opened in Bhopal to make 'medicine for the fields'. Laccho and Laxmi soon grew used to the odour of boiled cabbage that hung about the place.

'Laccho never knew much joy,' says Laxmi. 'She gave birth to a child, but it died before its first birthday. She got pregnant again, but again the baby died after just a few months.'

Meanwhile all kinds of gases were leaking inside the Carbide plant. Workers were often sick. They would vomit, feel giddy and had headaches. Laxmi and Laccho noticed that when the cabbage stench from the factory grew stronger their eyes would water and they'd have trouble breathing.

'We had a third child,' says Laxmi, 'but it too died in weeks. Laccho was in despair. Our fourth child lived a few months, then like the others it became sick and left us. At that point I think my wife wanted to end her own life, but I said, be patient, trust God and pray for a healthy child.'

In 1982, Laccho's fifth baby, a girl was born and to her parents' joy survived. She was two years old on the night of December 2nd, 1984.

'ON THAT NIGHT there were four of us running,' says Laxmi. 'Laccho, our daughter, me and fate – we all fled together.' The night of the Union Carbide gas disaster in Bhopal has often been described – the screams, panic, street lamps reduced to pinpoints by thick clouds of gas, dying figures stumbling in tobacco brown light, thousands of bodies in the streets – but we can never know what it was like to be there. Those who survived it find it too horrific to recall. 'We thought someone was frying chillies,' they'll say. 'The gas burned our eyes and lungs, we were choking. We ran. We fell down. We thought we would die.' Over and over one hears this story – it has become a formula that hides the anguish and deep terror of the victims. A 2000 study by the Fact Finding Mission on Bhopal found that nearly 6 in 10 survivors had significant losses of memory about 'that night'. When Mahesh Matthai's film Bhopal Express was screened in the city, the audience groaned and wept. Laccho was heavily pregnant and could not run fast. In the crush she fell unconscious. A few months later she gave birth to a second daughter. By this time both she and Laxmi were too ill to work. Their little family slid towards starvation.

aim a blowtorch at my eyes pour acid down my throat strip the tissue from my lungs drown me in my own blood choke my baby to death in front of me, force me to watch her struggles as she dies cripple my children, let pain be their daily and only playmate spare me nothing ruin my health so i can no longer work or feed my family watch us starve - see my children drinking water at night to fill their hungry bellies then poison our drinking water never warn us of the danger cause monsters to be born among us make us curse god stunt our living children's growth say it's nothing to do with you don't ever say sorry for twenty two long years ignore our cries teach me that my rage is as useless as my tears prove to me beyond all doubt there's no justice in this world for you are a big american corporation and i am a woman of bhopal

the people its gases had injured to the witness stand. There were 568,000 of them. India's politicians settled for a pittance that made Carbide's share price jump. Most survivors got less than \$500 to last the rest of their lives. Over the years since 1984 this comes to \pounds 0.03 a day. Well, it would buy a cup of tea.

(The *Times of India* reported that after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, Exxon flew in fresh lobster to feed sea otters affected by the spill at a cost of \$500 per day per otter.)

Laxmi and Laccho, ill and unable to work, were now destitute. When their two little girls cried at night from hunger, Laccho, like many other mothers, filled their tummies with water from the well. Only years later did people living near the factory learn that for years their water had been poisoned by chemicals abandoned by Carbide. By then cancers and other illnesses were raging and children were being born malformed.

In 1995 Laccho lost her mind.

'SHE STRAYS IN THE ALLEYS,' says her husband. 'Often improperly dressed. Some make fun of her, but most feel pity. So many here have lost their wits, living beings who are no longer aware of their own existence.'

A study by the *National Institute of Mental Health* and *Neuro Sciences* found that at least half of those exposed to Union Carbide's gases suffered from mental health problems. That was in 1985. There have been no further government studies.

'When we lost Laccho,' says Laxmi, 'our girls, needing a mother's care, had to look after her instead. Now they're married I do my best to keep her clean and cook our meals. I can't hear well, my sight blurs, my limbs are numb. I take any work I can get, yet I can't fill our bellies.'

Laccho listens with a smile. Some trace of a forgotten life stirs in her, she feels the urge to offer us tea and gropes for a strainer and glass.

'She can no longer see,' says Laxmi sadly. 'It's the final cruelty. In June last year, she was betrayed by her sight. For her there's no more day, just one long night, full of what dreams I dare not think. She sits at the door crying senseless words with no one to feel her agony. There's only me, and these eyes of mine are wet with tears.'

Union Carbide was worth billions, but resisted paying compensation. It threatened to wreck any case brought against it by calling every single one of the survivor's poem

MENTAL ILLNESS IS NOT RECOGNISED as an effect of gas-exposure in Bhopal. Sufferers get no help or support. All the government hospitals in Bhopal between them have not one psychiatrist.

The only place these poor people will find help is at our free Sambhavna Clinic where we now have a psychiatrist and other staff trained to help people with mental problems. Ours is also the only place in Bhopal where people affected by water poisoning – and the children of survivors – are treated free.

It is said that medicine works better when it is given with love. We offer a blend of cutting-edge modern medicine, classical Indian herbal treatment, yoga and massage. We have so far given medical care to some 20,000 gas and water survivors and their families. Thanks to the generosity of British newspaper readers, all consulations, medicines, treatments and therapies are completely free.

The poor of Bhopal, no less than the victims of recent great catastrophes, were innocent. They did nothing to deserve their terrible punishment. But after they died, thousands in one night of horror, no crusade was launched, no rock concert was staged for their benefit, no pop stars sang about freedom and the world has all but forgotten Bhopal.

Please help generously, we really need you.

FREEFONE 0800 316 5577 TO DONATE NOW WITH A CARD or visit www.bhopal.org/donations

I cannot and will not turn a blind eye to the suffering of the innocent victims of Bhopal which has been going on 22 years too long

1.	I want to give $\pounds_5 \square \pounds_{10} \square \pounds_{20} \square \pounds_{50} \square \pounds_{100} \square \pounds_{250} \square \pounds_{500} \square \pounds_{1,000} \square \pounds_{3,000} \square \pounds_{5,000} \square$ Other
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