

When our shoes wore out we wrapped leaves round our feet and kept on

STORY COMPILED BY
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WE MUST ALL OF US GO to see the Prime Minister. When Rashida said this, we all agreed. Yes, he would listen to our problems. It was the only way to get heard.

We did not know where Delhi was, nor how far away. We had no money for trains or buses. Rashida and Champa said, 'We'll have to walk. We'll all go together.'

What lay ahead, what we would eat, where we would sleep, how we could meet the Prime Minister, these things we did not know.

There were 80 of us women with about 12 menfolk and 30 or 40 children. We were all of us gas victims. A newspaper man saw us leave Bhopal. He said, 'These women will never make it to Delhi.'

At first we could only walk a few miles a day. Each one carried a small sack of essentials, a bedsheet, change of clothes. As the days went on, we could cover up to 25 miles, children and all. We learned that Delhi was 400 miles away.

It was June, the monsoon was coming, but it seemed that the gods were co-operating with us. Never were we lashed by the rains.

I had not more than 30 rupees (£0.40) with me when I set out. Some of the others pawned ornaments along the way. We spent the cash on medicines and food for the children.

Genda Bai found five rupees on the road. It lasted us a week.

The food we took with us from Bhopal lasted just one day. People in the villages were kind to us. They often cooked for us. Or they'd give the ingredients, and we'd cook dinner on open fires.

We'd wake up very early, at around 3am, and start walking to escape the cruel sun. Our shoes soon wore out. We tied leaves to our feet to try to ease the pain of the blisters.

When night came in the middle of nowhere we would lie down by the road under the night sky. Three or four would stay awake to watch over the rest. At dawn we were shocked to see dead scorpions and snakes on the road, killed by the passing trucks.

All along the way, people would ask 'why are you doing this?' We would tell our story. Often they'd say, 'We will walk along with you for a while.'

The fast walkers would go ahead to find the way – to mark the route they'd leave pounded rice on the road. When we got near the Chambal ravines, people started warning us that the dacoit gangs would kill us, but we were sure the dacoits wouldn't harm us.

The local police chief said the dacoits wouldn't touch us. To show his support he walked alongside us with his men, for 30 miles. At the edge of his district he was in tears when he said goodbye. He told us, 'If I had the power, I would have agreed to all your demands long ago and saved you from this trouble.'

In Dholpur we had a cold reception. Commissioner, police, local MP – all were unfriendly. They said, 'Who asked you to set out on a trip like this?' We had nothing to eat, nowhere to sleep, not even a place to rest. They said we couldn't stop. The Dholpur police said they'd take us in their vans and get us quickly through the district. We said no, we'll walk. The headlights of the police van pierced the darkness as we trudged all that night.

Most people helped us with no thought of caste or religion. Among us differences melted away – we cooked together, ate together and shared our troubles together.

In Guna, we were planning to spend the night in a Hindu temple when someone saw a sign that Muslims weren't allowed. Where would the Muslims among us go? Someone began singing *hum sub ek bain* – 'we are all one'. The head priest of the temple joined in the singing, and he asked everyone to spend the night in the temple.

That was one of the best places we stayed. We had excellent food and inside the temple there were many rooms. We slept very comfortably that night.

I'm a Muslim. I loved the taste of the *lowki ka kbeer* (creamed pumpkin) we were fed there.

In Gwalior, the local newspaper discovered us. In most places they ignored us. We had no idea that we should have alerted the newspapers beforehand.

There were times when we were so exhausted at the end of the day, we had no energy left to cook or eat.

We'd force ourselves, otherwise how would we walk next morning?

THE LONG WALK OF THE BHOPALI WOMEN An amazing true story of courage and unbreakable spirit

We must go to see the Prime Minister.

Where is he?

In Delhi . . . I think.

How will we get there?

We'll walk.

How far is it?

I don't know.

Which way is it?

Don't know.

How long will it take to get there?

Don't know.

Okay, let's go.

We just started walking. Our food soon ran out.

People were kind to us, they gave us milk and places to sleep.

They'd ask, where are you going?

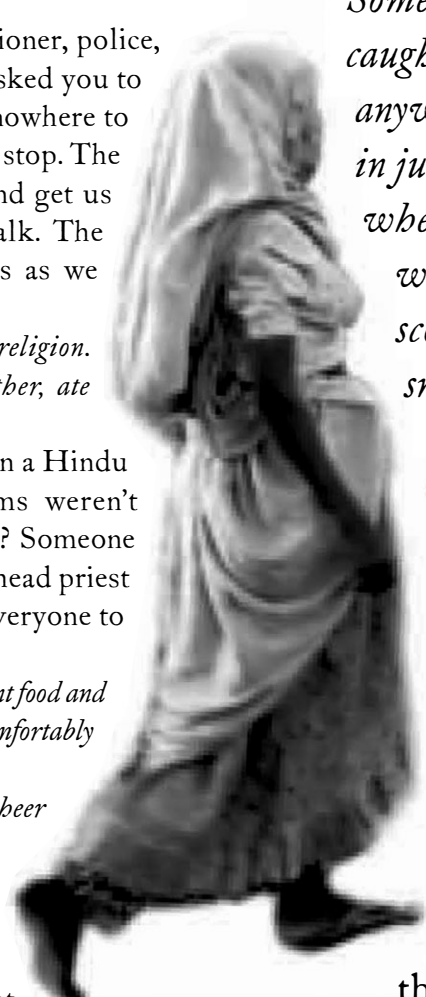
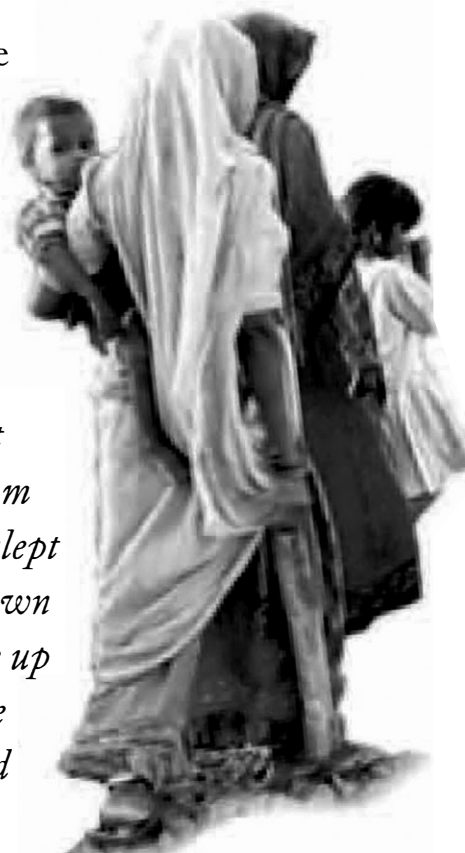
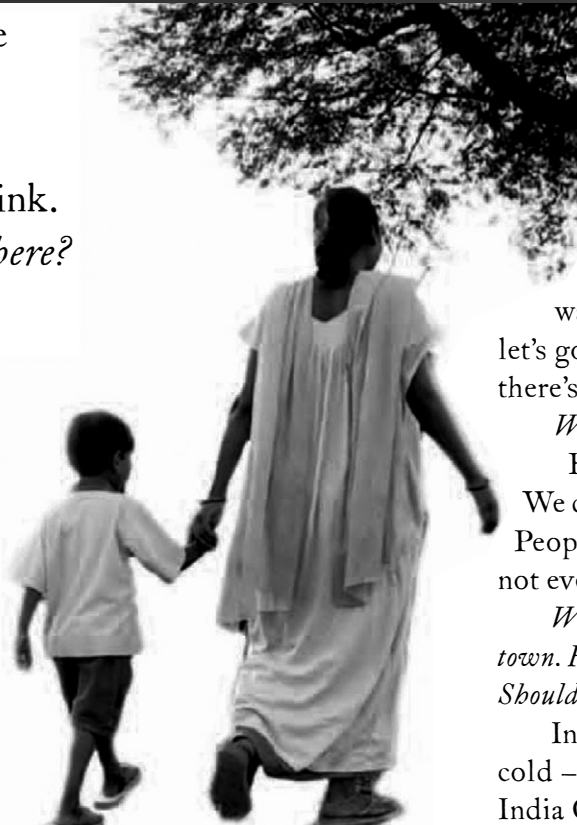
When they heard our story they said, we wish we could come with you. And some did.

Sometimes night caught us far from anywhere. We slept in jungles, at dawn when we woke up we would see scorpions and snakes lying crushed on the road near where we were lying.

We were warned that the bandits would kill us but the bandits sent word that they wouldn't harm us.

When we reached Delhi, we began asking people the way to the Prime Minister's house.

They laughed at us and said, 'Do you foolish women really think the Prime Minister of India has time for people like you?'



Like many others I got my period during the walk. We used folded cotton cloth as padding during this time and walking with cloth created rashes on the tender skin of our upper thighs. It was agony, but we just kept on going.

Yashoda was pregnant. Soon after we reached Agra she lost the twins she had been carrying.

Abeeda would faint every few miles. She was healthy when she set off and held up for around ten days. Then the bouts began. She'd just fall backwards. We'd spend some time reviving her then all move on.

Genda's little son Rajender became very sick. His head was reeling and his legs giving way. But no one said, 'Enough, let's go back.' We told ourselves, we've set out on this mission and there's no going back, we must get to Delhi and meet the PM.

We passed through 12 districts in 4 states in 33 days.

By the time we got to Delhi, we were completely exhausted. We did not know where India Gate was, nor how to meet the PM. People laughed at us when we asked the way to his house. We did not even know how to announce that we had arrived!

When we tried contacting Rajiv Gandhi, we were told he was out of town. He would be travelling abroad for ten days. We were in a quandary. Should we wait for him to come back?

In the countryside, many villagers had helped us. Delhi was cold – nobody offered help. We were camped on the open lawns of India Gate and had nowhere to go. Delhi was indifferent to us. No minister would give us an audience.

Devilal, a well known politician, was driving past. He stopped his car to ask us what the issue was. He listened to our story, then gave us 2,000 rupees and hoped it would help meet our food needs.

We met Suresh Pachouri, our own MP. He said we should go back to Bhopal, and promised he'd personally take care of our case. That's how we decided to go back. With hindsight, we should not have come back empty-handed, just based on promises.

We did see Rajiv Gandhi when he was visiting Bhopal. It was a public meeting but the police wouldn't let us in. We hadn't been through all that to be denied by them so we forced our way in.

Rajiv Gandhi apologised that we had not met him in Delhi after our arduous journey. He said, 'I did not know you had come all the way from Bhopal to meet me. Nobody told me. If I had known, I would have come to meet you at India Gate myself.' I hope he meant it. A few months later he made a deal with the Union Carbide company for compensation that over all these years works out at enough to buy a cup of tea per day.

Whatever we lost, we also found something. We are strong. When we decide to do something, no force on earth can stop us.

Says Rashida Bee, 'We saw the world in all its colours during that time. We found love and affection from unknown people, we were rejected, supported, faced hardships and bonded firmly together. We experienced a strong sense of solidarity. The women would reassure me from time to time, especially when I was feeling completely down and depressed – they would tell me that we would go on till we reached Delhi, even if some of us dropped dead from exhaustion. This gave me tremendous strength to move forward. One thought inspired me during that long walk – "If Gandhiji could do it at his age, why can't we?"'

THE SURVIVORS OF BHOPAL have never had anyone to turn to but themselves. A dozen years ago, lacking proper medical help, they decided to start their own free clinic for those still chronically ill from Union Carbide's gases.

The generosity of people in Britain and elsewhere helped make the dream a reality. Called Sambhavna, the clinic offers a unique blend of modern and traditional Indian herbal medicine and has cared for more than 20,000 people with great success.

20 years after the disaster, with one person still dying every day from gas exposure, and a new generation poisoned by chemicals leaking from the abandoned factory, we need to do more.

The Prime Minister of India was not there for these brave people, but you can be. Please give generously and remember that a small amount goes a very long way in Bhopal.

FREEPHONE 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

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