

Life and death of a mad Bhopali child

REPORT BY **INDRA SINHA**
www.indrasinha.com

SUNIL, FOR MUCH OF YOUR SHORT LIFE, you believed that people were coming to murder you.

'Nonsense,' we, your friends, would try to reassure you. 'The sky's blue. We are all here. You have done no harm to a soul, why should anyone want to harm you?'

'I guess I'm mad,' you'd say, who could see nightmares in sunlight and hear voices bellowing in his head.

Mad? Maybe you were. If so was it surprising?

When you are 13 years old, safely asleep in your house with your parents and five brothers and sisters, you don't expect to be woken by screams. You don't expect your eyes and lungs to be on fire, nor to discover that the screaming is coming from your mum, or that your dad's yelling 'Quick, everyone, we must get out! Union Carbide's factory has exploded!'

Nothing in your life has prepared you for what you now experience. Your family bundles out into darkness thickened by something that blinds and burns. All around, frightened people are running. A woman lies convulsing where yesterday you were playing marbles. In the panic to escape you are wrenched from your parents and swept away to fall into blackness. You wake on a truck piled with corpses, bundling you off to a funeral pyre because the people who found you thought you were dead.

When you learn of the awful, terrifying, unbelievable thing that has happened, you return to Bhopal to find your family. Alone, too numb to cry, you wander the streets. Posters show the faces of bodies as yet unidentified. On each brow is a numbered scrap of paper. This is how you learn that your mum and dad and three of your brothers and sisters are dead. What of the others? You keep searching, and by a miracle find them, your baby brother of eighteen months and your sister of nine, alive. You bring them to the only home you have, the house across the road from the Union Carbide factory.

So at 13, mad Sunil, you are the man of the family, the breadwinner. You find work as a day labourer and at night wash glasses at a tea stall. You keep your little family going and somehow get yourself to school often enough to pass the 10th standard.

Mad, are you? For the sake of your little brother and sister you refuse to be defeated. You are kind to others. Your house becomes a refuge for kids whose parents beat them. You ask, 'Is it better to have parents who beat you, or no parents at all?'

You learn all you can, dear crazy friend, about the disaster that took away your family, and you join other survivors. You take the lead. When neither Union Carbide nor the authorities give medical help, it's you who lays the foundation stone at the pole-and-thatch health centre the survivors themselves start, which will soon be ripped down by the police.

You march each anniversary. Your voice is heard. Then, dear madman, you are sent to the US to testify in

the Indian government's case against Union Carbide. You've never flown before and don't like the food. The government lawyers tell you, 'be brave and honest, just tell your story'. But they don't consult you or the other survivors before they do a deal with Union Carbide that makes its share price jump for joy.

You are outraged. Off you go on another world tour, another month of telling your story to whoever will listen in Ireland, Holland and the UK, which you



SUNIL KUMAR, BORN 1972, DIED JULY 26, 2006

tour with Bianca Jagger. You're mixing with famous people, but you, poor mad bugger, just want to be home in Bhopal. Instead you find yourself at the Union Carbide AGM in Houston. In the hotel lobby you're handing out copies of an environmental report when you're arrested. Union Carbide, whose gases entered your house and killed your family, charges you with criminal trespass. You're thrown in jail. It takes hundreds of phone calls to the mayor of Houston before you are released without charge. At last you can go home.

The voices in your head grow louder. They taunt and torment. You know your mind is playing tricks. You can't sleep, and talk of taking your life. Your friends try to joke you out of it, but privately we're worried.

Then, mad Sunil, you find another way to escape this cruel world. You run off into the jungle to live like an animal. 'I lay on my belly and drank from a ditch like a dog,' you say when we finally find you. You cannot get work, but when we open the free Sambhavna Clinic in Bhopal you instantly volunteer. You're penniless, but

refuse to be paid. You have a phenomenal memory. Every day you scan the papers for gas disaster stories and later recall the smallest details. You work in the clinic garden, for a time your voices abate. One day you piss in a cobra's hole calling, 'Come out, cobra maharaj!' The enraged reptile erupts from its defiled home, head raised and hood spread. You sprint 400 yards to the tamarind tree and never piss in a snake's hole again.

Ah, Sunil brother, the cool and beauty of the herb garden were not enough to quell the demons. Again you tried to take your life. You drank rat poison and after we'd had your stomach pumped you rang the bastard who through his tears is writing this and said, 'Guess what, it tasted sweet!'

Dear Sunil, we did our best to get help for you, but there was little help to be had. Although some 60,000 Bhopal survivors suffer from depression, anxiety, memory loss, panic attacks, insomnia and a host of other afflictions, the government refuses to accept mental health problems as a consequence of the gas. People with mental problems get no compensation or treatment, they are ridiculed and dismissed. Today, in all Bhopal's hospitals, there's only one part-time psychiatric consultant.

Sunil, when still a child, you told a journalist that those responsible for the carnage in Bhopal should be hanged. They have never even been brought to trial and in the end the person who was hanged was you. We found you in your flat, dangling from the ceiling fan. You left a note saying that you were fully in your senses when you decided to take your life. You, who rarely wore t-shirts, chose one specially for this final farewell. It said NO MORE BHOPALS.

Dear Sunil, you thought you were mad, but a world without justice is madder. At least you are now safe. We scattered your ashes in the flooded Narmada river, and for your funeral feast we followed your precise instructions: quarter bottle of Goa brand whisky, mutton curry from Dulare's hotel near the bus stand, betel nut, tobacco and all. Were you there with us? If not, who was it that in the darkness chuckled, 'I am no longer afraid of being killed - I am already dead and fearless.'

EVERYONE IN THE BHOPAL survivors' movement knew Sunil and loved him. He was one of its great characters. His death made headlines around the world.

For us his friends, running a clinic that has given free medical care to upwards of 20,000 people, the pity is that we could do nothing for Sunil.

We decided that although we had no budget, we'd open a mental health department at our free Sambhavna clinic. Today ours is the only place in Bhopal where poor people with mental problems can go for care.

How will we fund this extra work? We thought that if we shared with you not just the statistics of despair, but the human story, you would want to help.

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

Medicine works best when given with love. On that basis, here is my gift to help those still suffering in Bhopal

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