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A CLOUD OVER BHOPAL

Synopsis

The movie opens with a shot of several ambulances and cars clustered in the yard of the Union Carbide* factory at Bhopal. Workers, their faces covered with oxygen masks, are carried out on stretchers, or helped out of one of the buildings, and into the vehicles which drive off madly, led by an ambulance with its sirens howling.

During the credits. Establishing shot of the Union Carbide plant, then moving out into the city: the slums, the old town, almost medieval in character, the exotic oriental street scenes, the fine, run-down moghul architecture, the lake and the mosques shining in the sunset. A parking space is being built. Barefooted women wearing all their jewellery are carrying stones and cement. The ambulances rush through the evening traffic of cars, mini-buses, horse-buggies, threewheelers, towards a massive grey hospital (credits end).

In the crowd, a man pushing a motorcycle, buying himself a melon on a stand. It is Kumar, a journalist, thirtyish, with an open, intelligent, good looking face. He then climbs on his old motorcycle carrying his groceries, and drives slowly through the crowded streets. He reaches a decrepit dwelling, whose character would repel any westerner, but which is an example of normal, Indian working-class

* The name Union Carbide is to be used unless and until legal counsel definitively advises a change, whereupon Universal Chemical Corporation will be substituted therefor.

housing. His aged landlady explains to him that the telephone has rung several times, urgently, but that, as usual, she couldn't make sense out of the bad connection. Kumar shrugs, undismayed. In his room, an old typewriter is in prominence. While he is sorting his groceries and enjoying a smoke, his friend Amul appears, excited, to tell him that an accident has taken place, and that fifteen or twenty workers have been injured by a leak of phosgene gas at the Union Carbide plant. Kumar had therefore been right in pointing out in a series of articles the safety hazards caused by the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. Kumar is now aroused. He takes off on his motorcycle. Night has come.

He is seen bent over one of the workers, lying on a hospital bed, his face still marked by fright and pain. With difficulty he tells him (in Hindi) about the events of the afternoon. As Kumar is urging him on and taking notes, two security men appear and roughly drive him away. He defends himself, but is thrown out of the room. He hastens through the dismal hospital corridors, along rooms where the sick are huddled in miserable conditions, and reaches the office of the Medical Director, an imposing, arrogant man, who receives him very badly: "I know you... you are not a journalist, you do not belong to the staff of any of the newspapers... I know your articles, you want to make a name for yourself by running after sensation stories..." Furthermore, he says, none of the injured workers is in immediate danger, and a bulletin will be released for

the press the following morning... Kumar asks him: "When did you last enjoy dinner at the Union Carbide guest house?" The doctor is in a rage and orders him out. Kumar goes back home to write his article.

One of the Bhopal newspapers. Old linotypes and clacking presses in a gloomy cement hangar. Noise, clutter, agitation, white neon lights. Kumar is offering his article to the editor-in-chief at a desk in one corner. The editor is sympathetic to his views, congratulates him for having been right when he wrote his first articles about the danger at Union Carbide. Unfortunately, he cannot take the article for next day's issue, because Kumar is a freelancer. Someone of the regular staff is already working on the incident... Kumar points out to him that, apart from this latest event, the issue is a very big one: a major leak at Union Carbide could cause a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions, what with the slums near the plant, the abysmal safety conditions - there could be thousands of victims... They talk away at each other in this fashion, not unfriendly. The editor-in-chief sends him back to the Free Press again, the weekly magazine that had published his previous articles: they will surely have some space... Kumar leaves, frustrated.

It is not even easy to convince the owner of the Free Press, a small printer doing mostly bulletins and stationery, to remove a small article of local interest to make place for Kumar's article. Finally, the article is being composed, with Kumar watching closely. Proof is read aloud to him.

The article obviously has some effect: at a press conference called by Union Carbide, Mukesh, the young manager of the Bhopal plant, announces that his operation is scheduled to stop producing phosgene within a few months and that it will concentrate exclusively on the production of MIC, the insecticide. Someone objects that MIC is already a backward chemical technology, outdated as a chemical for pesticides; no, it is not so for our markets, replies Mukesh. He assures the reporters confidently that the plant is equipped with the latest technology for this kind of production "exactly like the Union Carbide pesticide plant in the United States," and that safety is much emphasized. Kumar then asks him about a secret report which Union Carbide experts from the USA had done at the Bhopal plant months before and which had criticized severely safety measures at the plant. Mukesh answers laughingly that there had been no such report, but a routine inspection by the parent company, resulting in advice about some minor safety improvements which were in the process of being implemented.

On his motorcycle, Kumar follows Mukesh to an elegant restaurant where a musician is playing the cithar. In the gardens, overlooking the lake, Kumar accosts Mukesh and a friendly, if reticent, conversation follows. "This is not an interview, is it?" asks Mukesh, after confessing a little too much.

Mukesh's office at the plant. He is talking with Mr Lal, one of his superiors from the head office at Bombay, a cynical and authoritarian man. Lal is very displeased: the Bhopal plant has had a bad press. He knows that Mukesh has been seen

at a restaurant with Kumar; he is appalled to hear that Mukesh has not even tried to pay off the journalist. He finds these kinds of contacts quite unhealthy: Mukesh should remember that he is in India, no longer at MIT, Cambridge. Kumar is a failure and a paranoid, who is good for nothing, but can only only cause harm, which he has set his mind on doing - and for some reason, he has chosen the Bhopal plant as his target. Mukesh remarks that Kumar seems to be remarkably well informed, and that he is right about the lack of safety in the plant. "I'm having incompetents forced on me," says Mukesh. None of you in Bombay know enough to back me up on anything. It's always the 'bottom line.' I hear a lot about profits but I hear damned little about what I am handling. Who knows whether MIC is safer than phosgene? Tell me that. I wish I had a million of rupees for every bad valve in operation. We're orphans here, with one step-parent in Bombay, and another in Danbury, Connecticut." "Every industrial plant is a potential danger, retorts Lal," and the Bhopal plant is much safer than most others. And, as you know, Union Carbide is losing money on it. Not much can be done at present. Moreover, every chemical plant has its doomsday prophet from the press clinging onto it, to get a pay-off or a name for himself, ready to blow up every incident for personal reasons, that's how the press survives."

The slums of Bhopal; bright daylight. A little girl is fetching water at one of the outlets. A tumultuous crowd noise is heard. Her mother, Kasturbai, rushes up, seizes her, and

joins a jostling crowd of people running down one of the narrow lanes. Other people are running as well, some carrying children, or the old people, or dragging goats. It's from the plant, they say, there is a leak of gas. They arrive at an open field where they sit until police come and scornfully tell them to return. It's a false alarm. Kumar comes up on his motorcycle and the police reproach him for scaring the people and spreading rumors. He walks back with Kasturbai to her hut in the slums. Her little girl is with her, also her husband and her mother. Kumar sits on the floor, with a tape recorder. He also takes notes. Neighbors peer through the door, curiously. Kasturbai explains to Kumar what happened: how she had heard all the noise and excitement and had smelled the gas, Voices of neighbors object to this: It was only a scare! - how her mother and herself had grabbed the child and had run, how she had covered the child's face to protect her. "It's just a scare," a man hollers in, the Union started it, they wanted to scare us all, to make us leave the area." Does she know what is being manufactured at the Union Carbide plant, Kumar asks Kasturbai. She replies: Medicine for sick plants. The people laugh and protest to each other, arguing about what the factory makes.

The Parliament building of the state of Madhya Pradesh, in Bhopal. As a result of Kumar's articles, safety at the Union Carbide plant is going to be the subject of a question to the Prime Minister. In the anterooms, Kumar meets with the deputies of the opposition, who have prepared the question.

That know that the Prime Minister and the ruling party are very much sold on Union Carbide. Do not the party bosses and the ministers from Delhi stay at the plant's guest house when they come to Bhopal? During the session, Kumar stays in the press seats, silent and tense. The Minister, suave, contemptuous, declares that all necessary controls have been undertaken at the Union Carbide plant, and that it presents no danger to the population of Bhopal. As for the incidents, they have been much exaggerated by some irresponsible part of the press.

Kumar leaves Bhopal, having found a job as a staff reporter with a daily newspaper in Indore. He takes leave of his landlady, of his friend Amul, of his friends from the printing plant. Jokes: Is there a Union Carbide plant in Indore? With his luggage and his motorcycle, he goes to the train station, station, where later so many are to die... It is night, and it is an Indian train station, with crowds sleeping and waiting on the platforms, hanging out of the train doors and huddling on the roofs of the railroad carriages.

The shanty-town around the Union Carbide factory. Scene of an electoral campaign. From the top of a truck, surrounded by a colourful music band and cheering supporters, amidst flags and garlands, the Prime Minister is giving the shanty-dwellers title to their plots. "Remember what was illegal yesterday is lawful today. You need have no fear of being driven from your homes! You can now live in peace and security on your own plot of ground! For this you can thank the Congress Party...!" The band strikes up music, which ends abruptly.

The night of December 2/3, 1984. At the cafeteria of the Union Carbide plant at Bhopal, a worker is sipping a cup of tea. Over the intercom, someone is called to the phone. The man gulps down his tea and gets up with a grimace of irritation. At the telephone, his supervisor is wondering why he is still taking his tea break so short a time before the end of his shift, when they still have to flush out the MIC output pipe. The disgruntled man and the displeased supervisor walk to the tank and, under the eyes of the supervisor, the worker connects a waterhose to the pipe to be cleaned. Off, like from a close future, the voice of the worker, in Hindi, with translation: "Yes, we always slip in a sheet of steel when we flush the pipes to make sure water doesn't get through to the MIC tank. Yes, the valves are closed, but they can leak. They leak very often... No, the slipblind was not put in, I noticed that... It was the job of the supervisor to put in the slip blind... He was new in the plant... But it was not my job..."

Now a voice off, in English, recites the countdown by the clock time on the disaster as the camera follows the successive actions of the workers of the "graveyard shift." The off-voice and music background build up tension as one after another events and human reactions occur, about twelve in all (creeping water, fuming liquid MIC, breaking of gauges, the first gas steaming from a wall. Double image of gauges moving as the supervisor says they'll take care of things after the tea

break, but tells a worker to shut off the flushing water hose.

Sleeping children huddled together in the dark and silence of a hut, in the shanties. The factory siren is heard. They stir. It stops. First faint cough, and whining of a baby. The children wake up, one after the other, coughing, complaining, rubbing their eyes. Adults also wake up, coughing, wondering, and then rise, in quickly growing agitation. In the streets someone is shouting. People start streaming out of the huts in rapidly increasing panic. Reports spread that people have already died.

These scenes alternate with action shots at the plant, where panic is also running high, commented by the off voice: six safety systems (quick shots) out of order. The concrete floor covering the tank begins to fissure with a rumbling noise. The workers looks down, in terror, then up, as the poisonous gas emerges hissing from the high stack. Waterhoses which are supposed to sprinkle the emission prove too short. The workers leave in panic, the supervisor climbs in terror over the fence and falls, breaking his knee.

The cloud of gas reaches other sectors of the slums and, driven by the wind, much of the old town. An immense crowd (400,000 people) are fleeing. Among them, Kasturbai, visibly pregnant, with her mother. She is calling in distress for her husband and her little daughter. The gas reaches the open train station, crowded with people waiting for the two night trains from Delhi and Bombay. Posters of the lately assassinated Indira Gandhi are everywhere. Cough, convulsion, panic and

death seizes hundreds -- travellers, employees, the homeless. Horses, attached to colorful taxi-buggies aligned in front of the station, are in the throes of death.

The office of the headmaster of the train station. He is struggling with the telephone, suffocating, a handkerchief over his face: "We do not know what is happening, people are dying here... Stop the trains. They must not come into the station." His assistant is trying desperately to keep the doors and windows closed. Not far away, in the old town, Kumar's former landlady is seen dying in her house. The gas cloud spreads to the countryside, where dozens of cows die in their sheds. Government officials flee with their families in official cars, instead of organizing relief and help. A factory manager calls the nearby Army base and the army rolls into action quickly. Far off, in the countryside, a lit-up train comes to a halt, its whistle bleating stupidly at the red semaphore.

People are now beginning to crowd into the Hamidia Hospital. The Medical Director arrives in his car, loaded down with victims, and walks through the rooms, trying to become informed and to direct his staff. He tries to call the (non-answering) Union Carbide plant: But what kind of gas is it, that has been released? The police force do not know either, and are also unable to make sense of their contacts with the plant. Some injured workers of Union Carbide are brought into the hospital - MIC, what the hell is it? - and the chief doctor orders them to a corner of the ward and to say nothing to anybody. (Among them, the supervisor who had fled over the fence.)

The Police call Mukesh, the plant manager, who is sleeping peacefully unaware at his home outside of Bhopal. He is surprised at the news, for he is reachable from the plant, whether by phone or by a 24 hour radio emergency service, and he has not been alerted at any moment. He dresses, his wife wakes up: "What is it?" "Something wrong at the plant. There is a panic in town." He drives in his car towards the city. Arriving at the outskirts, he pulls down the window: "let's get a whiff of whatever it is..." Immediately, he is seized by violent coughing, he gives out a distressed shout in Hindi and buries his face in his handkerchief.

Daybreak. Police and some Bhopal journalists enter the train station. Dead people everywhere. Survivors are picked up and brought to trucks. Corpses are piled up and carried away on army trucks. Police enter the office of the station master, whom they find dead, together with his assistant. Police enter the factory cautiously. It is deserted; the stacks are still. The only person there is the controlroom operator. "What are you doing here?" "Where else should I be?"

The injured survivors are taken to the hospital, through streets littered with the bodies of dead animals. In the daylight, it appears that the vegetation has suffered too: trees have lost their leaves, plants have shriveled up. Kasturbai and her mother, both affected and blinded, are also being brought to the hospital. The young woman is still clamoring for her husband and daughter.

The dead are lined up in long rows, they are marked with number plates, only their faces are uncovered. Many children among them. Survivors are walking along the rows, looking for family members and friends. Indian TV crews, photographers, journalists. Among them. Kumar is walking up and down the rows, alone. "I could only recognize the landlady, but I knew there must be others whom I knew." An American journalist breaks down crying. On an open field, surrounded by trees, close to the city, bodies are being burned on dozens of pyres. In front of one group, Kumar remains rooted in his place, for a long time, with a vacant expression: crouched near the body of a woman waiting to be cremated, a young man is bottle-feeding a very tiny baby. A little boy next to him is crying.

The airport at Bhopal: great agitation, many TV crews, crowds watching the arrival of an airplane, immediately surrounded by police: it is the arrival of the President of Union Carbide, from the United States. He is immediately arrested. Lal is with him; Mukesh, his eyes still burning red from the brief contact with the gas, heads the welcoming committee.

Kumar himself is being interviewed by an English TV crew. Referring to the arrest of the President of Union Carbide by the very same Minister who had enjoyed the largesse of Union Carbide and declared the Bhopal plant perfectly safe, he laughs grimly. The film and TV crews, shaken by the scene at Bhopal and indignant about the many revelations of negligence, organize a demonstration against Union Carbide and the Government of the State, in which Kumar participates (brief shots).

After the demonstration, Kumar goes to visit the slums, in company of an American journalist, Brad. They meet American lawyers and Indian assistants collecting "billion dollar signatures." As everywhere, lamentation and confusion. They interview inhabitants, and Kumar translates their answers for his new friend. He finds Kasturbai in her hut. Her eyes are still bandaged, her husband and daughter are dead: her mother shows them photographs of the bodies, with their number plates. Both women are very frightened, and talk of nothing but of leaving Bhopal: they are convinced the catastrophe will happen again, that another killer-cloud will come. They do not seem to be much aware of, or interested by the question of responsibilities, their attitude is fatalistic to the point of forgiveness. They have sold their jewels in order to leave for a village near Indore, where they had come from when Kasturbai had thought that he might find work in the new factories in Bhopal.

Kumar and Brad are having dinner at the restaurant where Kumar had once met Mukesh. The old cithar player is still there, although he has been affected by the gas; he is partially blinded and breathes with difficulty. As for the headwaiter, he shows scars of burning: they came to him during the massacre of Sikhs which had followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi a few weeks before. Brad is about to return to the US. He expresses scepticism about the chances of the victims ever getting adequate compensation, especially if the case remains in the hands of the Indian courts. Kumar is even more pessimistic,

and puts his bet on the American "vultures." The future is certain to hold other Bhopals, probably of even more frightening proportions. The whole world is an anarchy of pollution and war.

Four months later, Kasturbai is giving birth in a hospital in Indore. The doctor and nurses are frightened at what they see. The baby is placed in special care.

Kumar's office at the newspaper in Indore. A press despatch is brought to him: in an Indore hospital, a woman who had been affected in the Bhopal disaster has given birth to a child with grave malformations. Over the telephone, Kumar gets details from the doctor at the hospital: the pregnancy had been of normal duration, the weight of the child was normal, but it had been born without eyes, genitals, fingers and toes. It is dead now and an autopsy will be conducted. The name of the mother is withheld. Would he be allowed to see her, if he came to visit her at the hospital? The doctor answers that, if she agrees, he may...

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William L. Gavin