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## The Bhopal Syndrome

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## THE BHOPAL SYNDROME

DAVID WEIR

San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987.

Pp. 210. \$17.95 FPT cloth.

David Weir's new book is a global view of the dangers of pesticide production. The book is written with a flair for drama, in a style similar to his previous publication, *Circle of Poison*. The pesticide production industry is one of a number of hazardous industries that have developed since the industrial revolution. The book uses Union Carbide's 1984 industrial accident in Bhopal, India as a starting point to examine the possibilities and consequences of future accidents in the pesticide industry.

Mr. Weir takes the reader on a walking tour of worldwide pesticide manufacturing operations, examining the potential threat for major industrial accidents. As we are chillingly told, there are a number of potential Bhopals waiting to happen in the world, both in developed and developing countries. In developing countries, there has been a large influx of people from rural areas to the cities in search of employment. The result has been a lower class urban population that often lives in the immediate vicinity of pesticide production plants, and other hazardous industries. This is the case in Bhopal, where a large encampment of huts known as J.P. Nagar are located directly outside the Union Carbide plant.

The bulk of the work describes the dangers of pesticide manufacturing, dangers that in some instances are unnecessary. For example, Union Carbide's plant in Bhopal never reached half its estimated production capacity, since there was an insufficient market for the pesticide Sevin, Union Carbide's main product at the plant. Mr. Weir therefore postulates that the people of Bhopal were put at unnecessary risk from a product no longer in demand.

*The Bhopal Syndrome* briefly examines potential solutions to these dangers. They consist primarily of grass-roots awareness campaigns, so that local citizens can make informed choices about the danger of technologies surrounding them. The United States Congress has taken part of this suggestion to heart with the passage of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (SARA) in October 1986.<sup>1</sup> Title III of SARA sets forth requirements for the submission of information relating to the release of toxic chemicals. It is intended to inform the general public and communities surrounding covered facilities about the release or threat of release of toxic chemicals to the environment.

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1. The Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act, Pub. L. No. 99-499.

The author also proposes that citizens press for use of technologies such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM). The goal of IPM is to minimize the use of pesticides through the integration of other pest management techniques, such as biological predators, sterile males, and pheromones to lower pest numbers. One of the main differences between current farming practices and IPM is that current practices rely mainly on pesticides to control pests, while IPM uses limited applications of pesticides as one of a number of techniques to control pests. IPM accepts that some of the crop will be lost to predators in exchange for an improved ecosystem.

Throughout *The Bhopal Syndrome*, there is the general overtone that with hard work, we can rid ourselves of dangers like pesticides. Such a belief misses the point that the problem with pesticides is misuse and overuse. In conjunction with techniques such as IPM, pesticides can serve a useful function by increasing crop yields. Rather than reaching for a simplistic goal of eliminating or banning all pesticides, society must consider which pesticides are relatively benign to humans and the environment, and how they should be used to minimize health and environmental impacts.

In a larger context, pesticide production is one of many hazardous industries that pose difficult problems to developed and developing countries alike. The environmental problems of today—hazardous and radioactive waste, air and water pollution, and others—are problems that will be with us for some time. The United States, for example, learned this fact when it could not fulfill the lofty goals of eliminating “the discharge of pollutants into the navigable waters . . . by 1985” in the 1972 amendments to the Clean Water Act.<sup>2</sup> This realization came with the understanding that there was not a small number of environmental pollutants of concern, but rather hundreds or thousands of environmental contaminants. Even in minute quantities, some of these contaminants might cause severe harm to large numbers of people. *The Bhopal Syndrome* lacks this realization by citing meaningless statistics such as “75 percent of the United States population lives in proximity to a chemical plant” (page 116).

In conclusion, *The Bhopal Syndrome* is compelling in its documentation of the dangers of pesticide production. However, the work fails to provide us with any novel information or suggestions to decrease the risks of industrial accidents. The role of pesticide manufacturing, and in a larger sense, the role of other hazardous industrial processes in the world are addressed in a simplistic tone. Nonetheless, it may prove useful reading

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2. 33 U.S.C. § 1251(a)(1).

to the lay person unaware of the problems of industrialization in developing countries.

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