

Michael Gottlob: Laudatio on the Blue Planet Award for Rachna Dhingra and Sambhavna Trust

Berlin, 23.11.2019

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, comrades-in-arms, dear Rachna Dhingra and Nousheen Khan,

it's unusual to see Rachna sitting here so quietly. I actually only know her in action.

I had my first encounter with Rachna Dhingra in February 2008 in Bhopal. I asked myself about the house of the Chingari Trust, where I discovered Rashida Bee, a survivor and activist I had met on a previous occasion. She sent me to the first floor. And there Rachna sat in a large room, surrounded by other activists and comrades-in-arms. She accepted telephone calls, gave instructions, asked back, made suggestions. I realized I was in the middle of a larger strategy planning session.

It was about the logistical preparation of the second Padyatra, a walk from Bhopal to Delhi to remind the government of the promises they had made to the Bhopalis two years earlier (at the first Padyatra).

Not only the individual routes from place to place had to be organized, 800 km through five federal states. Evening meetings with local supporters at the 33 stage goals, demonstrations, press meetings, etc. were also to be arranged. Upon arrival in Delhi, a sit-in was to be held at Jantar Mantar, the 18th-century observatory site, which had developed into a hotspot for major protest actions in the capital since the 1980s.

A few days later, about a hundred people from Bhopal, including some survivors of the disaster, started their long march. The Indian civil society took a lively interest and solidarity addresses were constantly arriving.

Among the demands was the establishment of an empowered commission to ensure the long-term medical care and rehabilitation of victims and their children. They also demanded that the government take legal action against Union Carbide and Dow Chemical.

After 130 days of protest in Delhi, including a hunger strike, a die-in in front of the Prime Minister's residence, and several days in detention, the government promised to do so. (But two years later she had to be reminded of the Jantar Mantar again.)

Explanation: In the case of a die-in, demonstrators suddenly lie as if dead on the ground on a signal.

One year later we were able to welcome Rachna in Berlin with a delegation of survivors and activists from Bhopal. On the 25th anniversary of the catastrophe, Amnesty and the Bhopal Medical Appeal had organized a bus tour through several European countries during which Sanjay Verma, who had been rescued from the inferno at the age of six months, and Safreen Khan, who had founded the Children against Dow Carbide organization together with other

children of survivors, reported on the continuing effects of the gas explosion and the toxic substances in the air and soil.

In her lectures, Rachna Dhingra also highlighted the international context, i.e. the connection we had and have in the West with what was happening in India. What is to be remembered again and again! Seen from the perspective of today, the Bhopal disaster - in the words of the journalist Dirk Peitz (Die Welt, 09. 07. 2012) - appears as the "primordial catastrophe of globalisation".

Greenpeace and Amnesty have submitted extensive reports on Bhopal in which the 1984 disaster is examined for its causes and consequences. These have a lot to do with cost-cutting relocations of production to non-western countries, lowered safety standards and a lack of corporate responsibility. The Amnesty report, entitled "Clouds of Injustice", highlights the protracted delay in the legal process, which has increasingly turned into a second catastrophe and continues to this day.

Nowhere is the absence or weakness of global regulation and the impotence or reluctance of state authorities to hold multinationals accountable more evident than Dow Chemical's persistent refusal to follow the summons to Indian courts. The subpoena itself is the result of continued pressure from survivors on government agencies. Just a week ago, we saw Dow Chemical and UCC absent from the Bhopal District Court.

Sambhavna

In addition to the two disasters mentioned, a third must be added: the refusal to provide medical assistance and information for possible therapies.

In December 1984, the state hospitals were completely overburdened with the treatment and care of the survivors. Not only because they were poorly prepared or not prepared at all for such an emergency, but also because UCC did not publish any information on the leaked substances. There is evidence that the company was resisting potentially more effective treatment to prevent the poison from entering the bloodstream and damaging the entire body, not just the lungs and eyes, as the company claimed.

Early helpers and activists such as Satinath Sarangi, to whom Rachna is now married, spent months and years caring for the sick and eventually founded a clinic of their own.

In September 1996, the Sambhavna Trust Clinic opened as an independent, community-based hospital that continues to care for the well-being of the survivors and whose services are free to the victims.

The Hindi word Sambhavna means "creation of opportunities", opportunities through active compassion.

In accordance with the principles of environmental sustainability, its operations include rainwater harvesting, solar power generation, wastewater recycling, the use of non-toxic building materials and other environmentally friendly elements.

The clinic offers a mixture of modern and traditional therapies, such as Ayurvedic massage and yoga. Most medications are made in the garden behind the clinic. A team of employees goes to the surrounding districts every day and provides the people there with the necessary medication and information.

In addition, there is the work of volunteers from home and abroad, who stay at the Sambhavna Clinic for a few weeks or months and are deployed in areas of medical care and social work, as well as gardening, photography or in the information and communication system. The work of the Sambhavna Trust shows that it is possible to develop simple, safe, effective, ethical and participatory methods of treating survivors.

The work of the Sambhavna team has an impact beyond the clinic itself. Here, where one is confronted daily with the open wound left behind by the gas disaster in Bhopal, the urge for justice remains particularly alive. It is from here that activists for corporate responsibility around the world receive constant impulses.

And yet, in recent years there has also been increasing concern that the memory of the events of 1984 could slowly fade away and the commitment to the victims could diminish. There are people in the city and beyond in India who would like to strip off the legacy. The initiators of the clinic have always seen themselves fighting against oblivion.

At a staff meeting shortly before the 20th anniversary of the clinic, the idea of a "tree of memories" was born. A tree that reaches with its roots into the darkness of the underground of Bhopal, but with its branches and twigs also constantly reaches for light and life. In the meantime, local craftsmen have created a sculpture in the form of such a tree.

The rootedness in memory and the staying power in the work on the future have made the Movement of Survivors and Supporters of Justice in Bhopal one of the most enduring and decisive grassroots initiatives in independent India. With their campaigns and actions, the groups raise questions concerning India's self-understanding on the way to the economic power plant of the 21st century as a whole. Here, concepts such as economic growth, foreign investment, corporate crime, environmental protection and human rights are constantly being debated.

What the Bhopalis also emphasize among the many Indian action groups with their own agendas is their attention to other victims of human rights violations, near and far. Their names are often found among the declarations of solidarity for injustices suffered by people in other parts of India and the world.

Above all, however, it is steadfastness and willpower that have not been broken in 35 years and that give us an example of the wealth of civil society actors. The persistent struggle of the Bhopal survivors is a measure of the sustainability of all our efforts in the area of economic conflict and human rights.

I congratulate Rachna Dhingra and the Sambhavna Clinic team on this year's Ethecon Foundation Blue Planet Award, which they so much deserve.

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