



**TRAGEDY OF BHOPAL IN LITERARY IMAGINATION:
INVESTIGATING ENVIRONMENTAL AND HUMANITARIAN
CRISES IN INDRA SINHA'S *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE* AND ARUNDHATI
ROY'S *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS***

S. M. Ishmam Alamⁱ

Lecturer,

Department of English,

Pabna University of Science and Technology,

Pabna, Bangladesh

Abstract:

This paper looks into the literary elucidation of the aftermath of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy, one of the most cataclysmic industrial disasters, through engaging with Indra Sinha's *Animals People* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The Bhopal disaster, which happened due to the negligence of the corporate and neoliberal apparatuses, wreaked a dreadful despoliation in Bhopal; it caused over 3,000 instant deaths and over 25,000 deaths in subsequent years, resulting from the gas exposure. The novels under scrutiny deal with this traumatic historical event and investigate its frightful consequences from both ecocritical and humanitarian perspectives. Through the maimed protagonist, Animal, Sinha attempts to bring the Bhopal victims to the forefront, who still wrestle with excruciating illness and several forms of deformity that are not yet treated with seriousness and care. Worst of all, Sinha lamentably shows how aggressive nationalism and hideous internal power politics stand as barriers to fighting the subsequent ecological disasters, jeopardizing any hope for a better future. Similarly, Roy has also depicted the precarious vision of existence in Bhopal, where human beings are even deprived of “clean water” and “medical care”, without getting any slightest help from the authority and the media. Through the juxtaposition of Roy and Sinha's novels, this paper illustrates the manifold ways in which literary creativity can engage with environmental and humanitarian plight, providing nuanced insights into the long-lasting impacts of such tragedies on individuals and society at large. Furthermore, the paper also brings to the fore how these two fictional representations deal with issues of environmental deterioration, corporate or neoliberal negligence, and governmental apathy towards Bhopal's toxic legacy.

Keywords: Bhopal, environment, nationalism, neoliberalism, disaster

ⁱCorrespondence: email ishmamedru472@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984, one of the world's worst industrial disasters, not only left a significant impact on the socio-environmental landscape of India but also became a crucial subject in contemporary discussions on industrial negligence and environmental ethics. Rob Nixon has summed it up as an event that “*throws into relief a political violence both intimate and distant, unfolding over time and space on a variety of scales, from the cellular to the transnational, the corporeal to the global corporate*” (46). This catastrophic event, resulting from a gas leak at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, led to thousands of deaths and enduring health and environmental issues, raising numerous questions about industrial responsibility, environmental justice, and human rights. This paper focuses on two significant literary works that delve into the Bhopal tragedy and its far-reaching consequences: Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, a fictional reimagining of the disaster, and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which, while not directly centered on the tragedy, weaves a tapestry of contemporary Indian issues around it, including environmental degradation. Published in 2007, and the winner of the 2008 Commonwealth literary prize, this novel explicitly deals with the scars and aftermaths of the Bhopal tragedy through the narrative of a 19-year-old orphan named Animal. This novel is a fictional reproduction of the human and environmental damage resulting from the cataclysmic Bhopal tragedy. In this novel, Sinha gives voice to the marginalized and the subaltern whose voices are usually pushed into silence due to the hegemonic practices of conventional narratives. The protagonist, animals suffering and traumas are not merely his own; rather, they represent the collective trauma that the harrowing event inflicts upon. Sam Jordison rightly observes that animals people are “*such an adorable creation through too many agonies*” (n.p.). He also comments that “*the book promises to stab at the social consciences of all those who have so far failed [...] to even try to do anything about the continuing injustices and suffering in that blighted place*” (n.p.). While touching upon the issues around Bhopal, this novel raises some important questions regarding industrialization and its oblique effects on the environment. Muhammad Manzur Alam rightly comments that this novel showcases “*how an abrupt industrial disaster means an endless environmental hazard and denial of justice for the poor*” (345).

On the other hand, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, published in 2017, deals with the pressing sociopolitical issues of contemporary India, which has already become a hub of injustice, discrimination and intolerance. While touching upon the burning social issues, Roy, very masterfully, foregrounds the tragic incident of Bhopal in 1984. Surely, this novel is unlike animals people, and is not directly centered around the Bhopal tragedy. Roy brings this issue to delineate how injustice and discrimination operate in every layer of Indian society. Roy portrays that Bhopal-named men in India are still suffering, and no one is there who can alleviate their conditions since the Bhopal issue is an old issue. Therefore, these waffle-injured people become the eternal subalterns whose voices remain silent and treated with insignificance most of the time.

By juxtaposing these two South Asian novels, this paper aspires to depict how industrial disorders like the Bhopal tragedy in 1984 inflict uncurable damage and agony among the people who withstand the cataclysmic event. The primary objective of this paper is to scrutinize how Sinha and Roy encapsulate the environmental and ecological crises stemming from the Bhopal tragedy in their novels. By examining the portrayal of these crises, the study aims to shed light on the implications of industrial disasters on human lives and the environment. Furthermore, this paper seeks to contribute to the discourse on how literature can be an influential tool in understanding and interpreting ecological disasters, offering a nuanced perspective that goes beyond the conventional narratives. This paper also sheds light on how capitalism and neoliberalism endorse industrial negligence that gives birth to long-lasting disorders from which it is nearly impossible to get away.

2. Bhopal Gas Tragedy

Before delving deep into the discussion, I would like to discuss briefly the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984 because, these novels under study very explicitly, deal with the aftermath of a global tragedy. Happened in the midnight of December 3, 1984, over 500,000 people in the vicinity of the Union Carbide India Limited pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India were exposed to the highly toxic gas methyl isocyanate, in what is considered the world's worst industrial disaster. (Mandavilli, n.p.). The epicenter of this tragedy was the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide plant, which was majorly owned by the United States-based company, Union Carbide Corporation (UCC). The UCIL Factory was established in 1969 for the production of Sevin true methyl isocyanate (MIC). MIC is a highly poisonous chemical which is a kind of mandatory chemical for the production of pesticides. This chemical is detrimental to human beings and the environment, both due to its reactivity, toxicity and flammability. Worst of all, this infamous plant was situated at the heart of the city, amid thousands of residents and plants.

In the early hours of December 3, 1984, water entered one of the storage tanks containing approximately 42 tons of MIC, triggering a highly exothermic reaction. The chemical reaction caused a massive increase in pressure, leading to the release of an estimated 30–40 tons of toxic gas into the surrounding areas. The cloud of MIC, a colorless and highly toxic gas with a pungent odor, spread rapidly due to prevailing wind conditions, penetrating residential neighborhoods and public spaces. The immediate human toll was staggering. Official government estimates recorded around 3,500 deaths within the first few days, while independent assessments suggest that the immediate death count was likely higher, exceeding 5,000 individuals. Within the first two weeks, tens of thousands of residents suffered acute respiratory distress, corneal damage, vomiting, pulmonary edema, and neurological symptoms. Children, the elderly, and individuals with pre-existing health vulnerabilities were disproportionately affected.

The Bhopal disaster's aftermath has had enduring health consequences for survivors, often referred to as "gas-affected" populations. Chronic respiratory illnesses, pulmonary fibrosis, neurological disorders, blindness, reproductive complications, and developmental issues among children have been widely documented. Epidemiological studies have linked long-term exposure to MIC and its derivatives with increased prevalence of cancers and multi-generational health effects. In addition to physical health, the psychological and social trauma has been profound. Survivors experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and community-level disintegration. The disaster fractured social networks, as families lost members, livelihoods were disrupted, and traditional social support systems were rendered insufficient in the face of pervasive suffering.

The environmental impact of the Bhopal gas leak extended beyond immediate human casualties. MIC and other toxic chemicals released during the disaster contaminated air, soil, and groundwater, leading to long-lasting ecological damage. Several studies indicate that soil and water near the UCIL plant remain contaminated with hazardous chemical residues, which continue to affect local flora, fauna, and human populations dependent on the land for sustenance. Efforts to remediate the environmental damage have been sporadic and insufficient, often hindered by bureaucratic inertia, lack of technical capacity, and insufficient funding. The persistence of chemical residues highlights the systemic failure of industrial and governmental mechanisms to address long-term ecological consequences, further entrenching environmental injustices.

In the context of literary studies, Bhopal provides a crucial lens through which authors interrogate the intersections of human suffering, ecological destruction, and systemic injustice. By situating *Animal's People* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* within this historical framework, scholars can trace the ways in which literature amplifies marginalized voices, critiques industrial and governmental failures, and fosters a more ethically informed understanding of environmental disasters.

3. Industrial Dystopia and the Aftermath of Bhopal in *Animal's People*

This paper is concerned with *Animal's People*, a novel published by Indra Sinha in 2007, which was shortlisted for that year's Man Booker Prize and is also the winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writer's Prize. As narrated by Deb Donig, this novel delves into "the terrible reality of the deadly factory explosion in Bhopal on December 2, 1984... gets as close as it may to describing this horrific experience to a global audience" (1). This novel depicts an imaginary city named Kaufpur (an allegorical representation of Bhopal) that is devastated by a dreadful gas leak, and consequently, it has become a necropolis. According to Pramod Nayar, the city is "described in terms that take recourse to mythic tales, superstitions and ghost stories" (50). Smita Sahu rightly opines that "[t]he novel discusses the devastating impact of gas leak from a chemical factory on, not just the people, but also on ecology"

(549). Sinha, as a writer of ecocritical consciousness, has apprehension towards the ecology and environment and makes all of us alert about the annihilation of nature and the environment due to the leakage of lethal Methyl Isocyanate gas. It was the story about an adolescent 19-year-old young man named 'Animal'. 'Animal', the very name, is embedded in the dichotomy between human and animal. It is Animal's remembrance that he walked on his four legs because his spinal column had been crumpled due to the deadly chemicals of the horrible gas leakage incident in Kampani's industrial unit. In Nayar's words, "*chemicals have transformed [him] into abhumans*" (30).

Sinha utilizes vivid imagery and symbolism to underscore the extensive environmental damage caused by the toxic gas leak in Bhopal. Animal's distorted spine represents the bodily mutation and malformation endured by gas victims. Animal, says Nayar, becomes the "*very embodiment of this theme of corporeal abjection, with his deformed limbs that cause him to walk on all fours*" (32).

Descriptions of the "*morbid, acrid air*" that burns survivors' lungs evoke the lingering pollution and contamination from the abandoned factory site. By framing the story through Animal's perspective, Sinha gives voice to marginalized victims who were often treated as less than human. Animal must navigate a world full of gas-induced suffering and impoverishment that officials promptly ignored. The text suggests that smaller lives are disregarded to enable industrial progress and state corruption. The residents of the city – or "*the kingdom of the poor*" as Animal dubs them – mostly exist in a state akin to what Giorgio Agamben (1998) has called "*bare life*," or life that may be killed with impunity.

Animal's People encapsulated human suffering in several layers. The first one is psychological, and through the documentation of psychological sufferings among people, Sinha shows how this disaster left a permanent mark of trauma and fear among the people. Ma Franci's example can be taken into account, who has lost control over her senses after the tragedy. She became extremely hallucinated and expressed that she hears the voices of angels and demons. She became so traumatised that she, in Animal's description, lost all knowledge of Hindi and English that night, and believes all languages other than French are gibberish. Musing on the industrial disaster in Kaufpur, she frantically talks about *Apokalis* (refers to apocalypse) and imagines that "*others are [also] getting a taste*" of this dreadful apocalyptic vision of society (62). To her traumatic mind, God is "*full of anger and is going to unleash his full fury on the world*" (62). Out of excessive mental tremor, she also feigns the scorpion on the wall as growing into giant warriors. She insists: "*terror [...] began here*" and that "*here it will end*" (64).

Animal himself is also extremely traumatic. He once "*walked on two feet just like a human being*" (1), but as he came across the gruesome event of Bhopal, gradually, he lost control over his body, and started to walk with his hands and legs like an animal. Such transformation stamps an extreme level of trauma in his mind, and as a consequence, he avoids mirrors and is haunted by the sight of his shadow, feeling "*raw disgust*" (2). He is perturbed by jealousy and "*rage against all things that go or even stand on two legs*" (2). Later

on, in the novel, he comes across a “roundabout of madness” (55) when his voices shout “all kinds of weird and fantastic things” (55). He even feels that he “will die...[but] afraid to ask” anyone about this traumatic experience” (56).

This novel also documents how environmental damage leaves a permanent scar on other human beings of that locality. On several layers, this catastrophic plight smashes the health and hopes of the Kaufpuri people. Somraj's example can be taken into account. He used to be a famous singer, but now, he cannot sing because the company “stole away [his] breath” (33). Like Somraj, Animal also talks about a young mother who lamentably says that the poison is “in the soil, water, in our blood, it's in our milk” (108); and she refuses to feed her baby poison. Environmental disorder also brings about societal disorder. Nisha also sheds light on the example of a factory-worker woman who lost her husband due to exposure to the gas, and after that, she, very pathetically, expresses how she is being harassed by moneylenders. All the aforementioned issues stem from environmental degradation, and that is how ecological crises give birth to humanitarian crises.

4. Issues around Injustice, Negligence and the Scars of Bhopal in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Although the Bhopal gas tragedy is not the central focus of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, it emerges as a significant and recurring motif that underscores themes of enduring injustice, systemic negligence, and governmental apathy. Roy intricately weaves references to Bhopal into the broader narrative, using the disaster as a lens through which the structural failures of political institutions and the pervasive corruption of authorities are critically examined. The novel highlights how bureaucratic inefficiency, corporate collusion, and political indifference not only contributed to the scale of the tragedy but also obstructed efforts toward accountability and restitution in the years following the event. Through this, Roy foregrounds the lived experiences of marginalized communities who continue to bear the brunt of environmental disasters long after the immediate crisis has passed. The Bhopal disaster, in her narrative, becomes more than a historical event; it serves as a symbolic trope representing the wider socio-political injustices that afflict contemporary India. By drawing attention to the enduring legacies of industrial negligence, Roy critiques the broader patterns of state and corporate failures, situating Bhopal within an ongoing discourse on environmental justice, human rights, and moral accountability. The tragedy thus functions as a powerful emblem in the novel, revealing the intersections between environmental catastrophe, political corruption, and the structural inequities that perpetuate social suffering.

Roy inserts the Bhopal issue very skillfully to delineate the dystopic condition of the country, where the sufferings of Bhopal-maimed people hardly receive any media attention due to the power politics. These maimed men are not in a physically sound situation; there is no sign of improvement, but “their condition [is] deteriorating steadily”

(111). Nevertheless, amid the scorching sun, these maimed men of deteriorating physical condition cross a long way from Bhopal to Delhi to claim the justice they deserve; they came to Delhi *"to demand compensation: clean water and medical care for themselves and the generations of deformed babies who were born after the gas leak"* (111). Their intention is not to wreak havoc in the city; instead, they are putting forth some urgent and indispensable issues which are needed to get ample coverage. Conversely, media authority pays no heed to this issue since their *"struggle [is] too old to make the news"* (111). Moreover, no significant news is published against Mr. Warren Anderson, the C.E.O. of Union Carbide Corporation (alleged main culprit behind Bhopal tragedy) since *"news and other media contents [...] are shaped to the requirements of capitalist, or corporate ideology"* (Severin and Tankard 282). Here, Roy criticizes the corrupted media, blinded by corruption, and silenced by power that lacks any genuine interest in the mass welfare.

Roy inadvertently focuses on how these Bhopal people suffered due to the negligence of the authorities. But, to the people in power, the *"[p]hotographs of deformed babies, misshapen aborted fetuses in bottles of formaldehyde and the thousands who had been killed, maimed and blinded in the gas leak"* become utterly insignificant. It is almost as if there is an inverse relationship between the importance of the cause and the amount of media attention it receives. Roy, on the other hand, like a true Saidian intellectual, raises uncomfortable questions to the capitalist authorities about the crimes the latter once committed against the people of Bhopal. Roy, thus, *"speaks the truth to power"* (Said 1996, xvi), and by challenging the authority, she, very resolutely, becomes the *"disturber of the status quo"* (Said 1996, x).

Like Roy, Veena Das (2005) has also offered a characteristically suspicious reading of the Indian government's attitude towards the company. She asserts that the government *"compromise[d] the rights of victims by unilaterally arriving at a settlement and granting immunity to Union Carbide against the expressed wishes of the victims"* (qtd. in Hannah, Morehouse and Sarangi 52). This statement, along with Roy's assertion against the apathetic government, shows how the Bhopal people suffer in many ways.

Moreover, a maimed Bhopal boy has become immensely popular at the time when Miss Jebeen dies, and *"in the supermarket of sorrow, the Bhopal boy, victim of the Union Carbide gas leak, remained well ahead of her in the charts"* (327). As argued previously, Bhopal issues do not get much focus in usual times because the Bhopal issue is clearly a demonstration of a government that fails to fulfill the needs of the people dwelling in the state. But now, the Bhopal issue has become that much popular because the Bhopal boy is Hindu, and he has nothing to do with the imminent cases of Kashmir. Conversely, the demise of Miss Jebeen gets minimal media coverage since the Indian government does not want Kashmiri causes and issues to be broadcast.

5. Conclusion

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the ecological and environmental problems resulting from one of the biggest industrial disasters in history, with a particular focus on

the Bhopal tragedy as depicted in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The comparative analysis of these two novels reveals their insightful perspectives on the tragedy and its extensive implications. The themes of environmental degradation, human suffering, and the quest for social justice are central to both novels. These themes resonate deeply with the aftermath of ecological disasters, highlighting the struggles of marginalized communities and the need for environmental stewardship. The socio-political commentary in both works offers a profound critique of the systems contributing to such crises, emphasizing the need for greater accountability and sustainable practices. Moreover, these novels serve not only as reflections on the tragedy but also as commentaries on the human condition in the face of environmental disasters. These novels underline the urgency of addressing ecological concerns, contributing valuably to our understanding of environmental ethics and justice in the context of one of the most catastrophic industrial disasters in history.

Creative Commons License Statement

This research work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>. To view the complete legal code, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.en>. Under the terms of this license, members of the community may copy, distribute, and transmit the article, provided that proper, prominent, and unambiguous attribution is given to the authors, and the material is not used for commercial purposes or modified in any way. Reuse is only allowed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be perceived as influencing the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

About the Author

S. M. Ishmam Alam is Lecturer in the Department of English, Pabna University of Science and Technology. He has a Bachelor and a Master's degree (thesis) in English Literature from the University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh. Previously, he worked as a lecturer in Varendra University, Rajshahi, for almost three years. His areas of interest include Literary Theory, New Literatures in English, Postcolonial Literature and Theory, and Cultural Studies among others. He has several academic publications to his credit, and has presented and participated in many international conferences.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3118-0104>

Researchgate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/S-M-Alam>

References

- Alam, M. M. "Ecological Rifts as Disaster in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2023, pp. 345-360. *Tandfonline*, Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02759527.2022.2158279>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.
- Donig, Deb. "Seeing double in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*: Local Toxins, global toxicity and the universal Bhopal." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54(4): 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1402808>
- Hannah, Bridget, Ward Morehouse, and Satinath Sarangi. *The Bhopal Reader*. Apex Press: 2005. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_Bhopal_Reader.html?id=HKpjAAACAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Jordison, Sam. "Booker Club: *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha." *The Guardian*, 8 Oct. 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/oct/08/bookerclubanimalspeopleby>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2025.
- Mandavilli, Apoorva (9 July 2018). "The World's Worst Industrial Disaster Is Still Unfolding". Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/07/the-worlds-worst-industrial-disaster-is-still-unfolding/560726/> The Atlantic. Archived from the original on 23 August 2020. Retrieved 10 July 2018.
- Moore, Alexandra Schultheis. "'Disaster Capitalism' and Human Rights: Embodiment and Subalternity in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." In *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature*, edited by Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, 231-46. Routledge, 2011. Retrieved from <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203805190-17/disaster-capitalism-human-rights-alexandra-schultheis-moore>
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture*. Routledge: 2019. Retrieved from https://www.routledge.com/Ecoprecarity-Vulnerable-Lives-in-Literature-and-Culture/Nayar/p/book/9781032092614?srsId=AfmBOorRriIoEmjRfuT9CS_H9fRM6mJiovPbi2ca0FrbibZ7h097ORAg
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2jbsgw>
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin Random House, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/the-ministry-of-utmost-happiness-9780241980767/extracts/1583-the-ministry-of-utmost-happiness>
- Said, Edward. *Representations of the Intellectuals*. Vintage, 1996. Retrieved from https://books.google.it/books/about/Representations_of_the_Intellectual.html?id=IWcRg3YQAsYC&redir_esc=y

- Sahu, Smita. 'The Emergence of Environmental Justice in Literature, *The Criterion*, 5:2 (2014): 547-551. Web. 16 Sept 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.the-criterion.com/V5/n2/Smita.pdf>
- Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People*. Simon & Schuster. 2007. Retrieved from <https://www.simonandschuster.co.uk/books/Animals-People/Indra-Sinha/9781416526278>
- Severin, Werner J., and Tankard, James W. *Communication Theories: Origin, Methods and Uses in Mass Media*. Pearson, 2014. Retrieved from https://books.google.it/books/about/Communication_Theories.html?id=QAYqAQAAIAAJ&redir_esc=y