

Negligence of Duty and Negation of Human Rights: A Study of Indra Sinha's Novel *Animal's People*

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Abstract

The paper dwells at length on Indra Sinha's *The Animal's People*, published in 2007, which brings to the forefront the plight of Bhopal gas victims and draws parallels to the neglect of the welfare of the working class people of our country even today. The paper is an attempt to raise a pertinent question of when will the governments of Third World countries become Welfare States rather than sacrifice the lives of their citizens for cheap material gains from First World Nations. The paper aims to make an earnest appeal to governments and policy makers to focus on less dangerous ways of advancements and consider the wellbeing of human beings and environment as of paramount importance because though Time is in a flux and keeps flowing away, the sufferings of the victims of the twentieth century corporate accidents still remains the same in the twenty first century even after nearly four decades of the mishaps. Emphasis is placed on developing an understanding of the factors that generate both the short and long term risks and consequences in major dislocations arising due to such disastrous events.

Keywords: Mishap, disaster, displacement, rehabilitation

Turning back the pages of world history and the records of scientific advancements, the twentieth century can be considered as the century of greatest developments in the scientific field and the most difficult and worst hit period that mankind had suffered. The two World Wars in the first fifty years of the twentieth century and the gravity of the havoc caused by the Wars made the world realize that another World War will result in the destruction of the world. Hiroshima and Nagasaki of 1945, the photograph of Napalm Girl in the Vietnam War of 1973, the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984 and the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 trigger sorrowful memories about the destructive power of science. It is a pitiable state that many of the scientific inventions were made by the First World Nations and these countries set up factories in the Third World developing countries to manufacture the products and as a result the third world nations have to bear the brunt of the often used phrase that science is both a boon and a bane to mankind. Thousands of workers in these factories and the people in the nearby colonies have lost their lives in many dangerous accidents in these factories such as leakage of poisonous gases, emission of radioactive elements and constant effusion of pollution. The compensation

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sanctioned to the victims and the families is meagre and neither the companies nor the governments show a serious concern about the process of displacement, resettlement and rehabilitation. Even the judiciary is dumbfounded when crooked laws can aid the companies and governments justify the sanction of paltry compensation. It is disheartening to note that the victims have to knock at the gates of the government and legal machinery for many years to seek redressal.

The paper dwells at length on Indra Sinha's *The Animal's People*, published in 2007, which brings to the forefront the plight of Bhopal gas victims and draws parallels to the neglect of the welfare of the working class people of our country even today. The paper is an attempt to raise a pertinent question of when will the governments of Third World countries become Welfare States rather than sacrifice the lives of their citizens for cheap material gains from First World Nations. The paper aims to make an earnest appeal to governments and policy makers to focus on less dangerous ways of advancements and consider the wellbeing of human beings and environment as of paramount importance because though Time is in a flux and keeps flowing away, the sufferings of the victims of the twentieth century corporate accidents still remains the same in the twenty first century even after nearly four decades of the mishaps. Emphasis is placed on developing an understanding of the factors that generate both the short and long term risks and consequences in major dislocations arising due to such disastrous events.

The novel *Animal's People* not only reflects on a specific ecological disaster but also makes the people cautious about their survival necessity. The story is set in a fictional place called Khaufpur, which shows strong parallels with the toxic gas disaster that took place in Bhopal, the erstwhile capital of Madhya Pradesh in 1984. A large amount of toxic gas, methyl isocyanide leaked out from a pesticide factory owned by Union Carbide, an American corporate giant in the production of pesticides, on December 2nd night in 1984. Bhopal city was shattered to pieces as neither the administration nor the health officials knew how to handle the situation and the company had never conducted mock drills on handling emergency situations. People who inhaled the gas lost their eyesight and fell dead because of the toxic substances in it. Union Carbide claimed that the death toll is of 3,800 dead while municipal workers claim that there were at least 15,000 corpses. Until today the American company has not yet taken any responsibility and moreover, refuses to clean up the site as well as to compensate the victims properly. Therefore, approximately 25,000 people had died due to the exposure to the gas and the polluted water, and more than 1,20,000 continue to suffer from illnesses such as congenital disorders, blindness, extreme breathing difficulty, cancer and gynecological disorders even today. Although charged with manslaughter, the Union Carbide CEOs never appeared in the Indian court.

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Animal's People is a parody to the real time incident of Bhopal gas tragedy. In the novel the leak of a pesticide factory plant causes thousands of sudden deaths within one night. The American company rejects to clean up the site and to compensate the victims. Therefore, the population of the surrounding slums continues to suffer from numerous illnesses even decades later. In the novel this aspect is brought out by the protagonist Animal, a physically deformed orphan who is a victim of the tragedy. Nevertheless, it quickly becomes apparent that the novel is not only a reflection of the Bhopal disaster but also a caution of the impending danger looming large for the Third World countries in the hands of the powerful corporate First World Countries. When Zafar, the local activist leader, a spokesperson of the victims goes on hunger strike, he remarks to Animal:

Is Khaufpur the only poisoned city? It is not. There are others and each one of it has its own Zafar. There'll be a Zafar in Mexico City and others in Hanoi and Manila and Halabja and there are the Zafars of Minamata and Seveso of Sao Paulo and Toulouse. (*Animal's People* 296)

He indicates here that the situation in Khaufpur is not unique.

Throughout the world numerous people have suffered from different kinds of ecological disasters, in which the victims had to fight for compensation, which has been denied in many cases. Thus, the fictional Khaufpur represents a certain kind of place which is more prone to ecological catastrophe than other places for a definite reason. Animal says, "stuff like that doesn't happen in real life. Not in Amrika anyway. Here in Khaufpur it's different. Here in Khaufpur we had that night" (*Animal's People* 61). Animal's observation throws light on the fact First World nations are very careful about the welfare of their citizens and carry out dangerous experiments in Third World nations which at times might create great havoc. Permission is never granted by the First World Nations to set up these factories in their countries. Disasters like the toxic gas leak do not seem to happen in places like the fictional America, but they happen only a places like Khaufpur. This observation can be related to a process of what Rob Nixon calls "the transnational off-loading of risk from a privileged community to an impoverished one" (46). Thus in the case of *Animal's People* the Kampani (as Animal calls the American company responsible for the gas leak) not only outsourced the labour but also outsourced the risk for the surrounding environment and population that such perilous work entails by locating its highly dangerous manufacturing units of pesticides in India. To imagine that a catastrophe like the one in Khaufpur were to happen in a city in fictional America means to assume that people would sue for and most likely receive compensation for the damage caused by the effects. At one point Animal wonders:

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“Do you suppose anyone can explain, why did the Kampani choose this city to make its factory? Why this land? Is it by chance that the old name for this place is Kali’s ground, ground of death and destruction?” (*Animal’s People* 32)

In an ‘impoverished city like Khaufpur, a corporation can surely expect less resistance from its population, as they were socio economically poor and downtrodden. Zafar explains that, contrary to themselves the American company, “has everything on its side, money, powerful friends in the government and military, expensive lawyers, political power and public relations men. We people have nothing” (*Animal’s People* 54). The power and the influence the company enjoys is evident in the above lines.

These distorted power relations of the globalised world permit the Kampani to refuse to appear in front of the Khaufpuri court, “claiming this court has no jurisdiction over them”(*Animal’s People* 52), as Zafar puts it to the local judge who deals with the charges pressed by the Khaufpuri activists. Thus corporations like the Kampani in *Animal’s People* take advantage of their power over third world countries and outsource the risks of ecological disaster there, which naturally increases the chance of ecological disasters in the so called Global South as opposed to the Global North.

The narrative employs a very striking imagery to demonstrate the disparity between the privileged communities and impoverished communities. Within the global society, the Khaufpuris are portrayed as ignoble people. When the Kampani lawyers finally make an appearance in Khaufpur an old women addressed them: “You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. I would like to ask, was there ever much difference, to you? (*Animal’s People* 306). This reinforces the idea that not only the place that these people inhabit is ecologically dispensable, but consequently the people themselves are regarded as dispensable. Thus, the occurrence of an ecological mishap brings to limelight a social hierarchy in which the Khaufpuris are put on the same level as animals or even lower. *Animal’s People* illustrates this on a global scale, as the constant comparison takes place between the two fictional places America and Khaufpur . For example when Animal talks to the foreign journalist who wants to publish his story, he calls him sultan among slaves, “For his sort we are not really people. We don’t have names. We flit in crowds at the corner of his eye” (*Animal’s People* 9). Animal is ironical about the treatment meted out to the native victims by the foreigners.

But even within the disposable place of Khaufpur, there are certain places that are more dispensable than others. The protagonist Animal belongs to the lowest class within the population of Khaufpur, the ‘Kingdom of the Poor’, the Nutcracker-slum, where the population suffers the most from the consequences of the gas leak and hence the Kampani’s outsourcing of risk. Animal has to walk on his hands and feet because of his bent back and prefers to be

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classified as an animal, because, “if I agree to be a human being, I’ll also have to agree that I’m wrong-shaped and abnormal” (*Animal’s People* 208). This animalistic imagery demonstrates a social hierarchy.

The local government, the people’s representatives, who could and should protect everybody and especially those living under the most difficult circumstances, live relatively unaffected by the disaster and do not show any interest in improving the appalling living conditions in which their poor citizens’ have to survive. On the contrary they are bribed by the foreign corporation and the Indian bureaucracy denies publicly that the drinking water of the community is contaminated and therefore they suffer with so many health issues. When the trial against the kampani eventually makes progress, because a judge has taken up Zafar’s proposal to threaten to shut down the Kampani’s other assets in India, the judge is transferred so that justice is delayed and thereby denied. Overall, people who inhabit places that have been classified as dispensable are treated accordingly.

The people who are categorized as disposable face more consequences than health and their wellbeing is put at risk. Another aspect is also brought up in the novel in addition to this physical suffering is that the rich past and history of the city is wiped out. When Animal looks at the factory’s wall which is covered with protest writings against the kampani he thinks, “... this wall is its, the city’s history plus also where its history finished without warning when no one was expecting it” (*Animal’s People* 272). The damage inflicted on the racial wellbeing of a class of human beings and the environment by leakage of chemicals is evident in this passage.

The place Khaufpur is now solely associated with the disaster. At one point Elli, an American doctor who comes to Khaufpur to offer free medical care to the people, tells Animal how an old doctor complained that Khaufpur’s former rich culture is being forgotten, and now the city’s name will always be connected with the disaster. She is enraged because she thinks that the fact is, thousands of people who lost their lives are more important than the erasing of the city’s past. Nevertheless, the Indian doctor brings up an important aspect here. The disaster has not only erased their past but also the acknowledgement of their culture. People now seem to be primarily concerned about the pollution and its health consequences. The character of Somraj illustrates that people are not only physically incapable of working but also culturally inactive. He was a renowned and passionate singer for all of his life until the night of the catastrophe, the toxic gases impaired his respiratory system so severely that he was never able to sing again. Thus the place is now exclusively representing the disaster which deprives its population of their past culture and makes them feel forlorn and forsaken having lost their familial ties, ancestry and feeling deprived.

The debate about the global environmental crisis is certainly a complex and controversial one. The novel *Animal's People* draws attention to an aspect that needs to be taken into consideration, namely to the fact that locality is an important factor when it comes to ecological disaster. The vulnerable places are therefore clearly considered as dispensable and as a consequence the local communities in these places are classified in the same way. They are deprived of health as well as of their capacity of being able to identify themselves with their own culture and past. On top of that they lack the resources to demand proper compensation. Hence, a spatial relocation of ecological risk and disaster also reflects a social hierarchy, hierarchy between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the disadvantaged. In the end, the novel does not offer a utopian solution which corrects all the world's inequalities. Animal decides to decline Elli's offer to take him to America to receive a treatment which might enable him to walk upright again. He prefers to keep his old, familiar life, musing.

At the same time, the novel alerts to the fact that this cannot and will not continue infinitely. This will eventually lead to an uprising with a great impact, as Animal predicts. He finishes his story on a sinister yet hopeful note, "All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (*Animal's People* 366). This observation is Animal's unhelpful note about the magnitude of the disaster. *Animal's People* explores the really big issues like justice, equality and the nature of humanity.

Though not mishaps, the public uprising in Sterlite Copper Plant issue in Thoothukudi , Tamil Nadu in May 2018 and the ongoing issue of diverting water from Tamirabarani river to Coco Cola bottling units in Gangaikondan, Tirunelveli district are recent issues where overseas corporate giants tie up with the Indian bureaucracy to hit at the life source of ordinary people. The pollutants in the residue in the copper plant leads to health issues in the workers and commoners living near the copper plant and so is the case of diverting river water meant for agriculture to the bottling units resulting in unemployment for the farmers of the region. And in turn the waste chemicals are diverted by these units into the river, polluting the river water and leaving it undrinkable. This will lead to the depletion and contamination of the ground water too.

These two issues are drawn as parallels to Animal's remarks that all things pass but the poor remain and there will be more poor people in the forthcoming years. At this instant, the concluding lines of the paper aims to raise the pertinent question of when will the Third World nations turn into Welfare States and realize that providing a clean environment for its citizens is of utmost importance than playing a pawn with the lives of poor citizens.

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