

# India: Abdul Jabbar's Struggle for Bhopal Gas Tragedy Victims Has Lessons for Us All

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**For 35 years, the activist dedicated his life to building a movement for justice. Unfortunately, Bhopal appears set to forget his contributions.**

India can learn a lot from Abdul Jabbar's glorious struggle for justice for the dead and the survivors of the Bhopal gas tragedy.

At a violent time like this, when governments cannot tolerate even dissent on social media, the most indefatigable fighter for the victims can be a lodestar to all those who wish for an equitable society.

Jabbar Bhai, as he was fondly addressed, died of multiple ailments on November 12 in a Bhopal hospital, but his legacy endures. His evolution, through a 35-year-long struggle from a hand pump fitter to a tenacious strategist, is unparalleled in independent India's history of people's movements.

His strategy was essentially premised on eight pillars: secularism, empowerment of women, emphasis on self-employment through skill development, regular interactions with co-fighters, spreading education about mass struggles, frequent judicial recourse through public-spirited lawyers, street agitations, joining similar people's movements and an uncompromisingly adversarial stance against the government, regardless of ideology. An overboard public relations exercise was anathema to him, though Jabbar would go all out to help journalists who sought his help.

His organisation, the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangthan, metamorphosed from an assorted group of women to a well-organised fighting force. This was an extremely daunting task, which Jabbar Bhai himself was initially clueless about. But his undiminished righteous rage over the killing of innocent people in the world's worst industrial disaster steeled his will to fight an epic battle through thick and thin.

How this came about is an inspiring story, which began the day the Union Carbide factory spewed 40 tons of poisonous MIC gas. On the night of December 2-3, 1984, Abdul Jabbar was asleep at his home in Rajendra Nagar when the deadly gas leaked.

The poisonous gas from the Union Carbide pesticide factory killed 8,000 people in its immediate aftermath, and nearly 25,000 over the next few decades. It also left over 1,50,000 people suffering with respiratory, hormonal and psychological illnesses.

When the strong smell emanating from the carbide plant made its way into Jabbar's house, he took his mother, started his scooter and drove for almost 40 km to get her to a safe place. They left Bhopal for Abdullah Ganj. However, his escape proved futile. He soon lost his mother, father and an elder brother to the after-effects of this disaster. His own lungs and eyesight were substantially damaged. When he returned, an apocalypse was awaiting him on streets – dead bodies were strewn everywhere.

Then 28 years old, Jabbar was a changed man when he reached home. Keeping personal losses aside, he started taking the injured to the local government hospital for treatment. He also volunteered to take dead bodies for their post-mortem. The deeper he plunged himself into voluntary service, the more his anger surged.

He would later recall, "I started this campaign from my locality when I witnessed injustice around me. Politicians who were beneficiaries of carbide corruption were not coming forward to help us. So we the victims had to take matters in our own hands."

Nearly three years later, in 1987, he started the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (Bhopal Gas Female Victims' Association), an advocacy group for victims, survivors and their families. He led demonstrations seeking not merely allowances and compensation, particularly for widows who lost their husbands in the disaster, but also employment opportunities.

His first campaign slogan was the famous "*Khairat nahi, rozgar chahiye* (We don't require charity, we want jobs)". The slogan turned into a war cry as the organisation swelled.

Jabbar did not wait for the government to provide jobs to the women in his organisation. He succeeded in setting up tailoring centres where about 2,300 women learnt how to make *zardozi* strips and bags. He helped them fight lawyers, doctors, bureaucrats and the police. Soon enough, Jabbar's organisation included nearly 30,000 survivors, predominantly women, in Bhopal.

The members began to gather every Tuesday and Saturday at Bhopal's Yaadgaar-i-Shahjahani Park, a historic site where the battle against British colonial rulers was staged in 1942.

In 1988, Jabbar moved the Supreme Court urging it to order interim relief to the survivors until they get their final compensation. The next year, the Centre settled with the Union Carbide for \$470 million or Rs 7,200 crore, and the Supreme Court endorsed the agreement. The gas victims were outraged at the meagre amount. They felt cheated. It took a decade-long legal and street battles by Jabbar's organisation before the apex court ordered the government of the day to disburse a further Rs 1,503 crore and admitted that there were over 5,70,000 claimants to be compensated. Earlier, only one lakh claimants were recognised.

His relentless fight since his first victory in the Supreme Court is well documented. Nearly all judicial interventions and mass agitations that have resulted in the gas victims getting compensation, houses and hospitals and the perpetrators being prosecuted bear an indelible imprint of Jabbar's fighting spirit. For more than three decades, he went around conducting protests and filing court petitions, seeking greater medical rehabilitation for victims and the prosecution of local Union Carbide officials.

In the past three months, a severely diabetic Jabbar, suffering multiple heart ailments, moved from one hospital to another.

He circulated a WhatsApp message days before his death, saying a super speciality hospital like the Bhopal Memorial Hospital (BMHRC) had failed to treat him because they did not have the facilities. He called it "shameful". As his condition worsened, and gangrene set in, the Madhya Pradesh government prepared to airlift him and take him to Mumbai's Asian Heart Institute for treatment, but he died before that.

He would often stress that the fight for justice was important not just for Bhopal but for all of India.

His noble worldview was reflected in the way he painstakingly educated women in his organisation, on a wide range of topics: conflicts in the Middle East, Adivasi and Dalit rights movements including

the Narmada Bachao Andola, and so on.

Jabbar's ideals, though, were not limited to the organisation.

During the saffron surge in the last several years, our conversations would be more about India's social fabric being torn apart than the plight of gas victims. He would admit that his struggle had been losing steam, because people in Bhopal have become dangerously polarised along communal lines.

He would lament that even citizens who benefited from his agitations for compensation and hospitals have turned apathetic to the plight of others who are deprived.

"They appear to have convinced themselves that fight for justice is over now that victims have been distributed money. A majority of Bhopal's Hindus betray an impression that since potential beneficiaries of my fight are largely Muslims, why should they bother too much about it all." He sounded equally bitter about the Muslim community's apparent unwillingness to change with the changing times.

Jabbar had complaints about the media too, which he thought shamelessly endorsed the majoritarian view. He would blame the public and media apathy for the system ignoring gas victims, particularly the poor.

His grouse was not without basis. In the 15 years of Bharatiya Janata Party rule in Madhya Pradesh, gas victims got a raw deal. At one time, a move was afoot to wind up the gas relief and rehabilitation department altogether. The hospitals run for gas victims do not have enough staff or equipment.

Ironically, Jabbar Bhai's cynicism about the media, system and society as a whole was proven right during his illness and eventual death. He was virtually shunted out of the hospital that came up due to his PIL in the Supreme Court. Reduced to penury due to two months of treatment in hospitals, he was forced to do what he had never done all his life: seek government help. The help was promised, but came too late.

For someone who sacrificed his entire life for the dignified rehabilitation of half a million gas victims, Abdul Jabbar's last journey was a grim reminder of the Bhopal's ungratefulness to his long struggle.

Barely a few hundred people turned up for his funeral. Barring his journalist and activist friends and some politicians, the graveyard looked like a Muslim gathering. Worse, his woman comrades, who fought with him shoulder to shoulder all these years, were told to stay away from the last rites. The grieving fighters gathered at Abdul Jabbar's ramshackle two-room house and stayed put.

The departed soul would not have been pleased with what happened at his home on that day.

Undivided Madhya Pradesh saw the birth of three memorable people's movements - the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha of late Shankar Guha Niyogi, Narmada Bachao Andolan of Medha Patkar and the third led by Abdul Jabbar.

Jabbar's was different in the sense that unlike the other two, the warrior of Bhopal had taken on the might of a giant multinational in an urban milieu.

Jabbar also had to contend with myriad complex socio-economic and political obstacles. Complex relations between Hindus and Muslims in the city was unique to Jabbar's fight. Plus, his agitation had to deal with a substantial middle class, which had no qualms lapping up the fruits of Jabbar's

labour and then abandoning him when he needed their support for treatment for the poor.

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