

# Reviews

## FIVE PAST MIDNIGHT IN BHOPAL

The Epic Story of the World's Deadliest Industrial Disaster  
BY DOMINIQUE LAPIERRE AND JAVIER MORO

Warner Books, 403 pp., \$25.95

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At five minutes past midnight on December 3, 1984, a storage tank full of a volatile chemical compound exploded at a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, releasing a large cloud of deadly gas into the neighboring slums. The accident is often described as the greatest industrial tragedy the world has ever known, a contention the figures certainly support: The death toll alone ultimately rose to between 20,000 and 30,000. But words such as "accident" and "tragedy" often imply a work of fate. More accurately, what happened that night was a result of Carbide's decision to cut back on necessary maintenance in order to save money at a plant that had, despite great opening fanfare, proven to be a financial disappointment. In light of what we now know about Carbide's operation—a body of knowledge that benefits extensively from Dominique Lapierre and Javier Moro's detailed examination of the disaster—it is clear that it was not simply fate but all-too-human fallibility that led to the catastrophe.

It is nearly impossible to overstate the magnitude of the event. The authorities stopped counting the dead at what most observers believe to be an unrealistic total of 1,754, but independent estimates put the number at a minimum of 8,000—

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just for the days immediately after the accident. Three out of four Bhopalis suffered from the effects of the toxic cloud. Ten to fifteen are still dying every month from illnesses that can be directly linked to exposure. No court of law has ever passed judgment on Union Carbide for what can, without exaggeration, be called a horrid crime.

In 1962, Union Carbide ran an ad in *National Geographic* that depicted an emaciated, dark-skinned peasant woman working her plot of dry, chapped soil with two scrawny oxen and a primitive plow. A light-skinned hand holding a test tube appears to be emerging out of the sky above, and the accompanying text explains how Carbide's science is helping to build a new India.

The ad was a perfect example of the thinking behind the "Green Revolution" of the 1960s, when the First World's chemical companies believed their products were the next best thing to a miracle and would feed the Third World. Carbide expanded its operations in India with almost missionary fervor, and in 1980 opened a factory in Bhopal to manufacture a pesticide called Sevin. Engineers called it the "beautiful plant." Locals, Carbide said, would not only benefit from the well-paying jobs at the plant, but area farmers would also benefit from the pesticide. People were told that the plant was as safe as a chocolate factory. They weren't told that exposure to even the smallest amount of methyl isocyanate (MIC), the volatile chemical used to produce Sevin,

is deadly, nor that Carbide planned to ignore advice from technicians and produce MIC in large quantities.

Lapierre and Moro weave together the personal narratives of a huge cast of characters—from Padmini Nadar, daughter of a failed and impoverished farmer, to Warren Anderson, chairman of Union Carbide at the time of the disaster—and end up with a book that reads like a novel. It is a gripping story. The detail in which the authors relate the teeming life of the *bustees*, shantytowns erected by recent migrants to Bhopal, is worthy of Dickens. The book's intensely emotional focus on the story's characters is of the sort that made Lapierre's 1985 book, *City of Joy*, an international best-

seller. (And that also attracts the attention of Hollywood. *City of Joy* was made into a movie starring Patrick Swayze; it's rumored that Oliver Stone wants Penelope Cruz to play Padmini in a screen version of *Five Past Midnight*.)

Lapierre and Moro begin their story several years before the disaster and a 59-hour rail ride away from Bhopal in the southern state of Orissa, where the Nadar family, including eight-year-old Padmini, is forced off its tiny farm by an invasion of black aphids. They move to Bhopal as part of a desperate influx that is swelling the size of the city's slums. Padmini's father finds backbreaking work as a laborer on the railroad, making barely enough to keep the family on the edge of survival.

The Nadars, dispossessed by forces of nature beyond their control, seem like the perfect example of why India needs

