Revisiting the Bhopal Gas Tragedy: A Digital and Cinematic Reflection on Disability

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Abstract: The Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984, one of the world's worst industrial disasters, continues to resonate in public memory through digital media and cinema. This paper explores how modern visual storytelling in web series like *Human*, depict the disaster, shedding light on the long-term effects on survivors. These depictions raise critical issues related to disability, corporate negligence, social injustice, and exploitation. By examining the transformation of tragedy into digital narratives, this study aims to understand how such portrayals help broaden societal awareness of the event's impact, both on the affected communities and wider global audiences. Moreover, this paper discusses how digital platforms have reshaped the conversation around historical tragedies, emphasizing the intersection of disability, mental health, and class struggles in the context of Bhopal.

Keywords: Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Disability, Digital Cinema, Web-series, Corporate Negligence.

In the current era, the digital world has attempted to broaden and sensitize our understanding of disability. Recently, the web series 'Human' was broadcast on Hotstar, which highlights not only the artificial disabilities caused by the Bhopal gas tragedy but also genetic disabilities, its current impact, unemployment, and mental suffering. The series also tries to show the effects of this tragedy on both the upper and lower classes. As students of social sciences, we inevitably study or teach about such tragedies. In this context, the digital transformation of this tragedy attempts to bring new questions and issues to society. This article aims to examine some of these issues, but first, it is important to briefly review how disability has been historically depicted and understood.

Contesting Conventional Narratives

"The social marginalization of people with disabilities is not simply a consequence of individual impairment, but the result of systemic exclusion based on deeply entrenched cultural assumptions about normality and ability." i

The historiography of disability is rooted in understanding how societies have historically marginalized disabled individuals, not solely because of their impairments, but due to systemic exclusion based on cultural norms of normality and ability. To approach disability historiography, it's essential to understand how different historians and theorists engage with various models of disability, shifting paradigms, and challenges within the field.

One of the central debates in disability history is the shift from the **medical model** to the social model. The medical model views disability as an individual problem that needs to be cured or treated, while the social model argues that disability is socially constructed, with barriers created by society, not by individual impairments. Paul K. Longmore argues that society disables people through exclusionary practices, not their impairments. His work, Why I Burned My Book (2003), underscores how disabled individuals have historically been denied agency and how their resistance has shaped the disability rights movement. Lennard J. Davis, in Enforcing Normalcy (1995), critiques the medicalization of disability and explores how societies enforce normative ideas about bodies. He argues that the medical model perpetuates marginalization by focusing on "fixing" the disabled person, rather than addressing societal barriers.

The tension between these models has sparked significant debate in disability history. While the medical model dominated discourse for centuries, the social model became central to disability activism and historical analysis in the late 20th century, leading to a rethinking of historical narratives around disability.

The intersection of **disability with other identities**—such as race, class, and gender—is a crucial area of debate. Disability cannot be understood in isolation from these other factors, and many contemporary historians argue for an intersectional approach to disability history.

Kim E. Nielsen, in A Disability History of the United States (2012), Nielsen explores how disability intersects with other social identities. She highlights how disabled individuals, especially women and people of color, faced compounded discrimination throughout U.S. history. Nielsen argues that the struggle for disability rights is deeply connected to other civil rights movements. "Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent from the histories we tell. We must view disabled people not as passive, tragic figures, but as active participants in the making of the world."ii

Douglas C. Baynton, Defectives in the Land (2016), illustrates how disability was used to reinforce racist and exclusionary immigration policies. He argues that disability was often conflated with race, class, and ethnicity, showing how notions of "fitness" were used to justify exclusion from citizenship.

Historians now frequently argue that any comprehensive analysis of disability must consider how it interacts with other forms of oppression and identity. This approach challenges earlier works that treated disability as a monolithic experience, enriching the field with a deeper understanding of diversity within disabled communities.

Another significant debate concerns the historical treatment of disabled individuals as passive recipients of charity, reinforcing paternalism and dependency. The charity **model** positions disabled individuals as objects of pity, often stripping them of agency.

David M. Turner, in Disability in Eighteenth-Century England (2012), Turner explores how physical impairments were often tied to ideas of morality and virtue, leading to paternalistic views of disabled individuals. Turner argues that this "charity" perspective contributed to disabled people's marginalization, as they were seen as dependent on the goodwill of others.

Catherine Kudlick's work emphasizes that disabled individuals were often confined to institutions or subjected to paternalistic treatment, which denied them autonomy. Her call for historians to engage with disability as a central part of broader social history challenges the notion that charity was a purely benevolent act. Disability is central to our shared human experience. It reflects the complexity of human existence, bridging the gaps between ability and inability, and it forces us to reconsider the very categories by which we define human beings." iii

This debate has shaped modern disability historiography, leading historians to rethink how charity and paternalism have historically contributed to the exclusion and infantilization of disabled people. It also highlights the need for recognizing disabled individuals as historical agents, actively shaping their own lives and fighting against systems of oppression.

"Disability has functioned historically to define not only physical and mental difference, but also social, political, and racial difference. The exclusion of 'defective' individuals has often been used to police the boundaries of citizenship."iv

Historians have debated the extent to which disabled individuals have been passive victims of societal oppression versus active agents in fighting for their rights. The disability rights movement, emerging in the mid-20th century, reframed the disabled individual as an advocate and activist, pushing against the dominant narratives of passivity.

Paul K. Longmore: Longmore's scholarship heavily emphasizes the agency of disabled people, particularly in the context of the disability rights movement. He argues that disabled individuals have a long history of organizing and resisting oppressive systems. His work traces how these efforts culminated in key legislative victories like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Susan Burch and Michael Rembis (Editors of Disability Histories 2014), This collection of essays challenges the idea that disabled individuals have been passive recipients of care. Burch and Rembis argue that disabled

people have consistently resisted discrimination and fought for their rights across different historical periods.

The focus on resistance and agency has become central in modern disability history. Historians argue that rather than being seen as helpless, disabled individuals should be recognized as key actors in shaping their own lives and pushing for societal changes. This reframing offers a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of disability history, moving away from victim narratives.

The history of eugenics and its relationship to disability is a controversial and critical area of discussion. Eugenics sought to eliminate perceived "undesirable" traits, and disabled people were often targeted for sterilization, institutionalization, or even euthanasia. Historians debate how eugenics shaped modern understandings of disability and its lasting legacy.

Douglas C. Baynton's work demonstrates how eugenics not only targeted disabled individuals but also intersected with race, immigration, and class. His analysis in Defectives in the Land (2016) shows how eugenics policies framed disabled individuals as a threat to the "health" of the nation, leading to widespread discrimination.

Kim E. Nielsen in her historical overview, Nielsen argues that eugenics contributed to the dehumanization of disabled individuals, casting them as inferior and unworthy of full citizenship. Her work traces the impact of eugenics on U.S. policies regarding immigration, labor, and welfare, showing how these ideologies persisted well into the 20th century.

The study of eugenics has opened up critical debates about how societies define "fitness" and the ongoing legacies of these ideas in modern medical and social policies. Historians argue that understanding the eugenics movement is essential for grasping how disability has been constructed as a social problem rather than a personal one.

The historiography of disability has evolved significantly, moving from a narrow focus on medical and charitable perspectives to a broader, more complex understanding of disability as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon. The debates outlined here between medical and social models, intersectionality, charity versus agency, and the legacies of eugenics—illustrate the dynamic nature of disability history.

Attitudes toward Disability: An Overview

There are many examples of inhumane treatment of 'disabled individuals' throughout history. Disabled individuals were often placed in a separate category from those who conformed to social norms or were considered 'fit'.

Throughout history, societies have treated individuals with disabilities with extreme cruelty, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural prejudices. In ancient Greece, disabled people were often abandoned in the wilderness or killed, as in Sparta, where infants born with visible disabilities were left to die due to the society's emphasis on physical strength and warrior culture. Similarly, in the Roman Empire, disabled individuals were kept as jesters to entertain the elite. In medieval Europe, disabilities were frequently attributed to curses or possession by evil spirits, leading to exorcisms and other brutal methods meant to "cure" them. During the Renaissance, disabled individuals were forced into infanticiderelated tasks, and in Spain, they were burned or drowned as part of society's harsh response to perceived abnormalities.

In 1601, Queen Elizabeth I's government classified the disabled poor as "helpless poor," further marginalizing them. In early colonial America, disabled individuals who lacked family support were confined to almshouses. The 19th century saw disabled individuals in Europe confined to orphanages and asylums, where they endured inhumane treatment. In the United States, they were often hidden from society, banned from public spaces, and solely reliant on family care. The establishment of the "Institute for Idiots" in Massachusetts in 1848 led to the restraint of patients due to staffing shortages.

By the early 20th century, the mistreatment of disabled people escalated. In 1907, the U.S. began forcibly sterilizing disabled individuals to prevent the transmission of disabilities to future generations. Nazi Germany's eugenics policies were even more horrifying, as thousands of disabled individuals were sterilized or killed under the T₄ Program. The regime used gas, drugs, and euthanasia to eliminate those deemed "unfit" to contribute to the ideal of racial purity, legalizing forced sterilization through the 1933 "Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring."

Globally, disabled individuals were placed in segregated institutions and denied education. They faced solitary confinement, numerous restrictions, and widespread physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Their lives were devalued, and they were stigmatized as criminals or seen as ill, further deepening the discrimination and marginalization they endured across different cultures and eras.

India is no exception; it has had a similar attitude towards disability. Often, it has been defined as a result of karma, evil, or sin and considered undesirable. Sympathy is not only extended to the disabled individuals but also to their families. Perhaps this is why in India, parents have a legal right to decide whether to have a disabled child or not. Activist and academic researcher Anita Ghai argues that there is no consistent definition of disability in India, leading to an understanding of disability remaining within the framework of the medical model, which categorizes disabled individuals as 'other' and defective. Ghai believes that disability is a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, not just an incapacity or incompetence. Recently, India has emphasized adopting a new term, 'Divyang', meaning that nature has endowed them with special powers to compensate for their physical deficiencies, making it inappropriate to label them as disabled.

Civilized society has preferred to use the respectful term 'Surdas' for the visually impaired since birth. Surdas is one of India's great poets who was visually impaired from birth. The comparison of the visually impaired with 'Surdas' in India is a significant issue, though this is not our primary concern here.

In the 1980s, a debate emerged in Indian society regarding attitudes toward disability, resulting in the Indian government passing a bill in 1995 to secure rights for disabled individuals. However, the struggle for social and cultural equal opportunities seems lengthy. Often, the extraordinary talents of disabled individuals are not only recognized and admired but are also set as examples and sources of inspiration. However, this creates unspoken expectations of setting examples. If one is considered 'lesser' in this manner, becoming exemplary is seen as a way to gain acceptance. Whether it is right to have such expectations or to encourage them to participate in this race to make them feel their existence is a question worth considering.

Bhopal Gas Tragedy: Boundless Despair

On the night of December 2-3, 1984, there was a leak of methyl isocyanate gas from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. This incident led to the deaths of thousands of people and affected millions. The leak was entirely due to the company's negligence; several leaks had occurred before, but the company had not implemented adequate safety measures.

The company produced MIC, used for making pesticides, and stored 42 tons of MIC. When mixed with water, MIC becomes even more aggressive. Its presence in the city was akin to a bomb. Thousands of local residents sought employment opportunities there, with only the knowledge that it was dangerous, but without understanding the full extent of the danger or the efforts to provide this information.

On the night of December 2-3, 1984, people started experiencing relentless, terrifying coughs and breathing difficulties, which quickly escalated and led to the deaths of thousands. Victims felt their skin separating from their bodies, their eyes turning white, and a horrific scene of death spreading rapidly across Bhopal. To escape the pain and possibly avoid death, people began washing themselves in ponds and other water sources, but MIC had already turned all water sources into acid. Ponds were filled with corpses. By morning, there were bodies everywhere—in streets, roads, ponds, and railway stations. Many people, thinking it wise to flee the city, also could not escape. The incident not only infected millions but also created a 'disability chain' for future generations. Within seventy hours of the incident, approximately ten thousand people had died. According to the victims, the unfortunate ones are those who survived but are forced to die slowly due to their infections.

Efforts to provide immediate relief and compensation to the victims were initiated after the incident. Many non-governmental organizations and activists tried to secure the victims' rights and become their voice. The government formed a committee to study the incident and determine the amount of compensation. This expert committee included scientists from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, the National Environmental Health Research Institute, and the Indian Council of Medical Research.

Some organizations working with the victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy alleged that there were errors in the research conducted by this committee. Activists obtained reports related to this research under the Right to Information Act, 2005. The research methodology of the committee had significant flaws, leading to inconclusive findings. The Supreme Court has accepted a review petition demanding higher compensation for those affected by the incident. Statistics related to congenital deformities in children born to victims are a crucial issue for securing compensation.

The research by the expert committee revealed that compared to normal pregnant women, those affected by the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy and their children exhibited several health-related deficiencies. with many children suffering from 'congenital deformities'. According to this research, 9% of the 1048 children born to pregnant women affected by the Bhopal gas tragedy had multiple congenital health issues.

Bhopal Gas Tragedy and the Digital World

The depiction of the Bhopal gas tragedy in digital cinema has opened a new frontier for storytelling, blending the catastrophic event's harsh realities with the broader themes of social injustice, disability, and exploitation, while using modern visual narratives to engage a global audience in ways that traditional media could not. Several films and documentaries on the Bhopal gas tragedy have emerged over the years, each playing a crucial role in raising awareness about the disaster's various issues, from corporate negligence to the long-term health and environmental impacts. These works have continuously brought the tragedy back into public consciousness, highlighting its ongoing relevance and the unresolved struggles of the victims.

The 2011 documentary Bhopali, delves into the harsh realities of those who continue to suffer, particularly focusing on intergenerational trauma, disability, and societal neglect. The survivors find themselves caught in a web of bureaucratic red tape and corporate negligence. Despite promises of compensation and relief, the affected community remains marginalized and largely forgotten. Bhopali emphasizes the lack of accountability from Union Carbide (now Dow Chemical) and the Indian government, which failed to adequately address the needs of the survivors. Bhopali maintains a more documentary-like focus on the lived experiences of the survivors, it portrays the collective trauma of an entire community, showing how the disaster's legacy continues to permeate everyday life.

Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain (2014) adds another layer to the cinematic portrayal of this tragic event but approaches it from a different angle—focusing more on the build-up to the disaster and the culpability of Union Carbide. It emphasizes the immediate lead-up to the disaster, examining the mismanagement and the decisions that led to the release of methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas. Martin Sheen's portrayal of Union Carbide CEO Warren Anderson paints a nuanced picture of a corporate figure who is simultaneously defensive of his company's actions and overwhelmed by the disaster's scale. The film does not entirely exonerate Anderson but also attempts to humanize him, showing the complexity of corporate responsibility.

Bhopal Express (1999), is a more personal and intimate film. It uses the disaster as a backdrop to a story of love, tragedy, and resilience, framing the event within the lives of ordinary people who find themselves caught in the calamity. The narrative is more personal than overtly political, as it focuses on how the disaster disrupts their lives and dreams. In terms of emotional impact, Bhopal Express offers a more intimate portrayal of suffering, focusing on the personal losses and emotional devastation of its central characters.

The BBC documentary One Night in Bhopal (2004) offers a compelling, factual recounting of the Bhopal gas tragedy, providing a crucial investigative and historical lens through which to understand the event. It serves as a documentary anchor—giving audiences a more direct, journalistic insight into the disaster. This documentary meticulously reconstructs the events leading up to the disaster using survivor testimonies, interviews with key figures, and archival footage. The film feature real voices—survivors speaking directly about their experiences and the long-lasting physical and mental trauma inflicted by the gas leak. One Night in Bhopal focuses more on the immediate horror and chaos of the night itself. The survivors' stories in the documentary highlight the widespread devastation and the mass suffering experienced by the people of Bhopal, making the tragedy's scope feel more palpable and present.

Finally, the broader theme of exploitation and the struggles for compensation in Bhopali, or the dangerous work conditions highlighted in Bhopal Express and Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain—is ultimately rooted in the systemic negligence revealed in One Night in Bhopal. This documentary reinforces the idea that the tragedy was preventable, and that the people of Bhopal were victims not only of a gas leak but of a global system that prioritized profit over human life. The other films, each in their own way, explore how this exploitation continues to shape the lives of the survivors, adding layers of tragedy to an event that should have ended the night it occurred but continues to reverberate decades later.

In conclusion, One Night in Bhopal offers a vital, fact-based foundation that complements the dramatized and personalized stories told in Bhopal Express, Bhopali, Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain. By providing a detailed historical account, it deepens our understanding of the disaster and sets the stage for the more personal, emotional, and exploitative narratives that unfold in the other films.

'Human': "Trying to relieve people from their pain and trauma?"

The web series Human is an Indian medical thriller released in January 2022 delves into the emotional and psychological impact of Bhopal gas tragedy on people. Although the 'Human' web series is a tapestry of many small and large stories, our focus here is on certain characters and the issues connecting them to the Bhopal gas tragedy and identifying the patterns of disability.

How much does it cost to save a life?: In the absence of employment, an individual might offer themselves for human trials of newly manufactured drugs to feed their hunger and support their family, a plight that could be typical of any impoverished society. However, there are several aspects to this testing, as seen during the COVID-19 period. The situation described is from England, where efforts were being made to develop various drugs to combat COVID-19. It should be noted that England was not the only country in this race; many other countries were participating as well. Nevertheless, the media around the world extolled the bravery of those in England who volunteered for human trials of these drugs. Although similar events may have occurred in other countries, the media portrayal of the bravery of people in England was mesmerizing, showing that some were willing to take such risks without regard for their own lives to save millions.

In the 'Human' web series, drug trials involving the people of Bhopal are depicted, but it lacks the embellishments of altruism and heroism. Instead, it portrays the helplessness and the relationship between drug trials and poverty. These drug trials are being conducted on victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy. Due to unemployment, some of these individuals consent to participate, driven by poverty, helplessness, and the responsibility to provide for their families. The series highlights a critical issue: the generation affected by the tragedy has suffered from 'physical deformities' that render them incapable of working, and they are not offered any employment. Their DNA has become 'contaminated,' passing on its defects from one generation to the next. Can the 'defective' DNA created by this horrific industrial disaster be corrected?

The series also shows another aspect of drug trials, where victims are brought to the trial camps by their relatives or intermediaries without their knowledge. These unsuspecting individuals are often not informed about the potential side effects of the drugs. Intermediaries exploit them for their own benefit. In the series, a character named Mangu' his mother faces a similar situation, where diabetes medication is used to stabilize glucose levels before the trial to ensure it proceeds without interruption (the victim is brought to the camp by her son Mangu, who works in autopsies and dreams of a brighter future. For his better future, he includes family members in drug trials for a mere ten thousand rupees, considering it a cheap and good deal. The impact later appears as side effects because the trial involves illegal drugs, and there is no information outside the camp about these drugs, making it impossible to find a remedy, ultimately costing the victim her life.) The illegal drug trial business involves doctors, drug companies, and politicians. While drug trials are desirable for developing life-saving drugs, the question of whose body will be used is alarming. In the early 19th century, when allopathic medicines were in their infancy, slaves/'black-skinned' people were forcibly used for this 'noble work', followed by research on indentured laborers on ships. In the 'Human' web series, the depiction of the German drug company and Indian doctors and politicians searching for victims of the Bhopal tragedy for this 'extremely philanthropic work' is quite thrilling.

Tragedy and Mental Depression: Descriptions of the crisis caused by the Bhopal gas tragedy are frequently found in books, newspapers, magazines, etc., often detailing the event and its consequences. Post-tragedy, the fight for compensation and related issues also frequently appear in the news. The physical pain was so severe and far-reaching that mental depression was often overlooked. A unique aspect of this web series is its attempt to highlight the mental depression and its long-term effects related to the tragedy. The character, named Dr. GauriNath, survives a travel accident outside Bhopal, losing her parents, and feels somewhat lucky as she escapes the tragedy that night. She must pass through a crowd of bodies to retrieve her parents' remains. After her parent's death, her grandfather's house, which becomes her new home, offers shelter but due to her poverty and low status fails to provide a sense of belonging. She faces physical abuse and spends her childhood in torment and depression, which requires her to rely on syringes and medication even at the age of forty-five.

This chain of depression transforms her into a person willing to go to any lengths to achieve status and fame. She questions, "What is the value of a poor person's life... Zero?" She uses restricted drugs for trials, indifferent to whether the trial might cost these poor individuals their lives, as they are used like 'guinea pigs.'

Depression and GauriNath's journey do not end here but evolve into a character who engages in drug development as a solution to depression, seeking such drugs for herself and others like her. She searches for young girls suffering from physical and mental depression for human trials of these drugs, to test their reactions and ensure successful drug use. According to GauriNath, such (depressed) girls are not in short supply in the city; they can be found on every street corner. The series shows how hormonal changes from these drugs force these depressed girls into unwilling smiles/laughs under harsh

conditions. The trials are conducted on them without their consent, through deceitful means.

Thus, drug trials narrate a dual story in Bhopal: one where tragedy victims are used as 'guinea pigs' and another where depressed girls are exploited for the needs of a specific drug.

Digitalization of Tragedy and the Cost of Sensitivity: In contemporary times, sensitivity has played a crucial role in enhancing human creativity, whether in painting, photography, architecture, or cinema. When visual creativity touches emotions, it easily reaches the heart and provides a tangible form and language to emotions beyond national boundaries

The series also depicts the intersection of creativity and sensitivity but with a sharp edge. Displaying and documenting the deformities and 'twisted' bodies of the current generation affected by the Bhopal gas tragedy have become a demand and necessity of the present time.

In the 'Human' web series, a character named Neel, who is a photographer, is tasked with a project to document the victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy. He attempts to capture images of the effects of the tragedy on victims across homes in Bhopal and present them internationally. With the help of a volunteer, he reaches some victims, and the volunteer reminds him to give them some money in exchange for taking their pictures. Neel complains that his company does not provide money for this purpose. The volunteer reflects, saying, "Tell your company that if they want to win international awards for exhibiting this work, they must pay." The volunteer justifies the payment, reminding Neel that due to the tragedy, these individuals cannot find employment... after animals, they are subjected to drug trials... they do not become 'valuable youth'.

Here, a crucial question arises: who views themselves as a victim and who as a survivor? The meaning of the tragedy differs between the high and low classes; while the poor see themselves as victims, the upper class views themselves as survivors who escaped the carnage. When Neel asks Dr. Gauri if she considers herself a 'tragedy victim,' her response is that she does not see herself as a victim but as a survivor. The term 'survivor' carries pride and a sense of triumph, elevating Dr. Gauri's character from ordinary to significant and fulfilling her personal ambition.

The devastation of the tragedy and its impact is not the same for everyone. Although Dr. Gauri does not see herself as a victim, it is also hard to say she has fully overcome it.

As a web series, 'Human' adeptly portrays the Bhopal gas tragedy and the resulting disabilities, but it also reflects the current state of these victims and their societal significance, whether as 'guinea pigs' or otherwise. It presents the terrifying need of society, especially in medical science and drug manufacturing. The series' line, "How

much does it cost to save a life?" fits precisely. The question also arises: can changing only the terminology alter perspectives? Whether we call them disabled or differently-abled, can the societal status of these individuals be changed? What is the responsibility of the digital world in addressing this sensitive issue?

The digital portrayal of the Bhopal gas tragedy in web series and films serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness and preserving the memory of the disaster. Productions like Human bring new dimensions to the discussion by highlighting ongoing issues such as genetic deformities, disability, and exploitation through unethical drug trials. At the same time, movies like Bhopali and Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain underscores the long-lasting effects of corporate negligence and systemic failure. These visual narratives not only ensure that the story of Bhopal is not forgotten but also spark critical reflection on how we handle industrial disasters, disability, and social justice in today's world. In doing so, they contribute to shaping public consciousness and policy advocacy on behalf of the victims and their families.

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