



Film Review

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## Behind the Headlines Unmasking Truths of the Tragedy: Review of *The Railway Men: The Untold Story of Bhopal 1984*

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### INTRODUCTION

Investigative journalism plays a crucial role in any democratic society by serving as a watchdog and holding those in power accountable. Investigative journalism helps uncover and expose corruption, abuse of power, and other wrongdoings by individuals or institutions. *The Railway Men: The Untold Story of Bhopal 1984* (Rawail, 2023) comprises seven episodes; this *Netflix* web series tells the story of the railway workers who rescued lives during the world's worst industrial accident, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy.

*The Railway Men* begins with Investigative journalist Jagmohan Kumawat watching Warren Anderson leave India, thereby underscoring the fact that he had already lost the battle and that the innocent people who became the victims of the Bhopal Gas tragedy would never get justice in a country like this one. The most terrible industrial accident in history occurred in Bhopal on December 2-3, 1984. An explosion at the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide facility led to the emission of 30-40 tons of a hazardous chemical, methyl isocyanate (MIC), which spread across an area of around 30 square miles. This incident caused the death of numerous individuals and left hundreds of thousands injured Mehta et al. (1990). Many

people in the township of Bhopal were exposed to different levels based on how close they were to the plant and the weather. More than five lakh people have been officially registered as tragedy survivors Mishra et al. (2009). It occurred in a plant in India run by the multinational corporation Union Carbide Corporation, Bhopal, India. The tragedy will permanently change the chemical process industry (CPI) Gupta, (2002).

*The Railway Men* story centers on Bhopal Junction station master Iftekaar Siddiqui (Kay Kay Menon), who led the rescue efforts on a tragic night. An unexpected criminal named Express Bandit (Divyenndu) arrives to exploit the confusion but ends up helping rescue the victims. These railway staff work with recently hired locomotive pilot Imaad (Babil Khan) and Central Railways GM Rati Pandey (R Madhavan) to evacuate thousands of civilians by train despite turmoil and difficulties. As the minutes pass, the gravity of the situation grows, leaving viewers wondering if the rail workers will succeed.

### An Unsung Hero who Tried his Best to Prevent a Disaster

*The Railway Men* starts with investigative journalist Jagmohan Kumawat (Sunny Hinduja) fighting the American

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firm through his newspaper. He struggles, but skepticism and attempts to quiet him add to the calamity. The character of Kumawat is based on the real-life journalist Rajkumar Keswani. Much of the Netflix series is based on articles and reports Mr. Keswani wrote before and after the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. He was the first journalist to report the deadly effects of the toxic gas methyl isocyanate (MIC) and tried to raise the alarm, but alas, no one listened to a feeble voice on the streets. After such ignorance, the Multinational Corporation Union Carbide turned the entire city into a graveyard. It was too late to make amends, as the toxic gas kept scarring the residents for decades to come. It not only killed hundreds of people but also crippled thousands for decades. The resilient journalist tried to fight against Goliath like a true Davidian hero, but he did not see any mythical outcome in real life.

As an investigative journalist, Kumawat often focuses on social justice issues, highlighting injustices, discrimination, and human rights abuses. Because he wanted to learn about Union Carbide's unscrupulous practices in the factory. In the series, Imad Riaz (played by Babil Khan) informed Kumawat about MIC, the toxic gas that took away the life of his dear friend Mohammed Ansari (real name: Mohammad Ashraf). Before going forward, it is essential to point out that Babil Khan's character is entirely fictional. In real life, he was Mr. Keswani's friend, Ashraf, an employee of the treacherous chemical plant, who inhaled the toxic gas due to a leak and died on December 25, 1981. According to the reports, Ashraf died because of the manager's careless mistake. Ashraf's duty was over on the night of December 24, but the manager asked him to open a valve that had not been opened for over three years. Before opening the valve, Ashraf confirmed three times with the manager whether there was poisonous gas inside it, which the manager denied consistently. However, as soon as it opened, the phosgene gas leaked from it and came directly into contact with Ashraf's body. He was kept in the factory dispensary and was later sent to the hospital, where he took his last breath.

Investigative journalism contributes to public awareness by bringing to light issues that may have been concealed or overlooked. Soon after Ashraf's tragic death, Kumawat started looking into the company's records and its practices. He found out about several cases of negligence that raised an alarming threat to the residents of the nearby areas. He published several articles in his weekly Hindi newspaper to warn the public and the government. However, unfortunately, no one paid any attention. The Union Carbide chemical plant was a considerable source of income and employment for the locals. The government was only bothered about investigating once the big players sent their timely gifts to the ministers. As Kumawat rightly said in the series, no one spends a sleepless night over finding the truth until they or their loved ones have personally faced its consequences. The courageous journalist attempted to take on Goliath like a true Davidian hero.

*The Railway Men* is about a team of Northern Railway officials and concerned citizens who were among the first to recognize the gravity of the situation and who, in the face of overwhelming odds, fought back against the apathy and red tape-ism that is so common in a massive Indian central government organization. They exposed the Delhi babus who, instead of doing all possible to save Bhopal, criminally spent precious time transferring the buck and evading blame.

Kay Kay Menon plays the railway stationmaster in charge of Bhopal Junction in the series. Babil Khan is an ex-Carbide worker who is starting his new job at the station; Divyendu is a crook who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time; and R Madhavan is a top Railways official who turns his locomotive, the General Manager of Indian railway special, into a rescue missile.

The narrative has multiple strands, cutting back and forth in time; it opens with marriage and the bride's mother running short of cash at a crucial time; a train is heading to Bhopal with a terrified Sikh family trying to escape from a bunch of killers (former Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi's assassination had taken place just a month before, and retaliatory mobs were still on the loose); a smooth-talking con man is eyeing a trunk-full of cash in the station locker. It flashes back to 1970 when an American scientist was told to keep quiet about the dangers of the gas; it then goes back to the present, where systems are fast failing in the Bhopal plant, with just a few hours till the release. One of the most moving scenes in the series is a flashback to 1996 when the local investigative journalist (Sunny Hinduja), who was present that night, reconnects with a pregnant woman he assisted in getting to the hospital.

In the first episode of *The Railway Men* web series, Imad Riaz, a former employee, talks to a journalist, Kumawat, about the death of his friend at the plant due to toxic gas inhalation. In real life, Kamruddin's character is also based on Mr. Keswani's close friend, Bashirullah, who helped him get his hands on the company's confidential documents. These reports became the foundation of Mr. Keswani's newspaper articles highlighting the lack of safety standards. It was true that Union Carbide suffered huge losses during that period, but that does not give anyone the excuse to risk their workers and the residents' lives. As correctly shown in the series, the workers lacked proper training and the availability of proper safety gear at the time of the gas leak. Several pieces of safety equipment were missing from the factory, and even the pipelines were in shambles. However, due to their cost-cutting strategy, the company should have bothered replacing them to protect their people. They neglected their responsibility until it was too late to make amends. As stated, Investigative journalism often challenges the status quo and questions accepted narratives. While the role of investigative journalism is vital, it faces challenges such as financial constraints, legal threats, and the changing landscape of media consumption.



On the night of December 2, 1984, due to malfunctioning instruments and untrained workers at the plant, a highly toxic gas, Methyl isocyanate (MIC), leaked into the atmosphere, instantly killing many workers, including Kamruddin. Operators began routine maintenance activities that evening in the UCIL factory. Pipes were washed to keep a filter system clean by flushing contaminants with water. Knowing precisely how water reaches a highly reactive pesticide intermediate tank will never be possible Kok et al. (2019).

In the second episode, as the gas starts spreading into the highly populated Bhopal city, hordes of people begin to collapse in the streets, many of whom die. At Bhopal Junction station, Iftekaar and Balwant are initially confused by the chaos. They soon realized that people who were indoors were seemingly unharmed. They try to gather the crowds into the station waiting room. Due to incomplete cable repair work, communication systems are down, and Iftekaar needs a way to reach nearby stations and warn them. Imad, who had begun a new job as a loco pilot, becomes aware of the gas leak due to his history. He goes to the station to warn Iftekaar. Meanwhile, at a nearby station, Rati Pandey, a general manager for the Indian Railways, becomes aware of the situation.

In the third episode, Rati tries to persuade Railway Minister Rajeshwari Janglay to act and help the people stranded in Bhopal. However, her pleas are neglected by her superiors. Rajeshwari entrusts Rati to disobey the orders and help them anyway. Rati inspires several railway workers to help him in the cause, and they set off towards Bhopal. At Bhopal Junction, Iftekaar, Imad, and Balwant find their way to rescue people trapped at the station by putting them on a goods train. Meanwhile, Madsen, the American head of the plant, refuses to provide any help. A German scientist, who seemingly has an anti-dote to MIC, is thwarted in his effort by the Indian Government and Union Carbide.

In the fourth episode, Unable to warn them, a train with 1000 passengers approaches Bhopal Junction. The train is delayed due to anti-Sikh rioters. Meanwhile, Rati and his workers also make their way towards the junction. Iftekaar and Imad find a way to avoid a collision, but Imad dies due to inhalation. After helping the people board the rescue train, Iftekaar, too, seemingly dies. Balwant retrieves his key to steal money from the vault. Rati helps the survivors with medical supplies, and it is revealed that he and Rajeshwari are married.

Meanwhile, Kumawat, appalled at the disaster, begins documenting the event through photographs. The next day, rescue trains carry many survivors away from the city. At a makeshift graveyard, thousands of bodies are seen to be buried and burnt. Iftekaar, like a few others who were pronounced dead, wakes up. Balwant has a change of heart and returns the money. Many years later, journalist Kumawat revisited Bhopal and saw that the disaster's long-term effects were still being felt.

We can also remember the film 'Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain' which delves deep into the repercussions of corporate greed and governmental apathy, painting a poignant picture of the human tragedy that ensued. Director Ravi Kumar skillfully weaves a gripping tale, portraying the events leading to the Bhopal gas tragedy with stark clarity, highlighting the systemic failures that facilitated this disaster.

The film explores various perspectives, from the workers within the Union Carbide plant to the local populace affected by the gas leak. Martin Sheen's portrayal of Warren Anderson, the conflicted CEO of Union Carbide, adds layers to the narrative, depicting the moral dilemmas faced in the pursuit of corporate interests.

Kumar (1984) directed Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain, which instills a sense of urgency and suspense, holding the audience's attention throughout. The integration of archival footage alongside dramatic reenactments enhances the authenticity of the storytelling, immersing viewers in the tragic events of December 1984. Despite its somber subject matter, it offers glimpses of human resilience amidst despair. It serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing quest for justice and accountability by the survivors and their kin, prompting reflection on the ethical ramifications of industrialization and corporate neglect. It is a deeply thought-provoking film that sheds light on a dark chapter in history. With its compelling narrative and poignant performances, it effectively underscores the toll of unbridled corporate power, leaving a profound impact on audiences long after the screen fades to black.

### **Economic Opportunity for Low- and Middle-Income Nations**

Globalization and industrialization can increase economic opportunity for low- and middle-income nations. However, recent cross-national evidence indicates these processes may also increase industrial accidents and harm these nations' workers. Evidence from India suggests high numbers of industrial accidents, with the highest associated attributable deaths worldwide (McCord et al. (2021).

### **Psychological and Neurological Health Effects**

It has been observed that survivors of the Bhopal gas tragedy had substantial neurological, neurobehavioral, and psychosocial impairments. The report from the Indian Council of Medical Research New Delhi (ICMR, 2010) demonstrated that the manifestation of psychological consequences in a population that had been exposed led to feelings of worry and depression. A random survey of outpatients at ten government-run clinics was conducted between three and five months following the accident, and the results showed that 22.6% of those patients were suffering from psychiatric illnesses. A comparable number of individuals struggled with neurotic sadness, anxiety, and difficulties in social adjustment.

## Reproductive Health Effects

Twenty years after the gas tragedy, monthly irregularities, vaginal discharge, and early menopause have emerged as common concerns among Bhopal MIC-exposed women and their female offspring/girl children. These women also have a higher risk of developing cancers of the reproductive system. These situations are not only affecting the reproductive health of the women, but they are also leading to societal problems in communities that are traditionally conservative. The use of retrospective cohort studies has demonstrated the maternal-fetal and gynecological effects of a substance. Clinicians in Bhopal have noticed that now the girls who were exposed while they were still in their mothers' wombs, as well as those who were exposed while they were infants, are experiencing "menstrual chaos." During the early stages of the city of Bhopal's recovery, a comparative survey was carried out to investigate the effects of exposure to the deadly gas on pregnant women who lived in areas exposed to the gas as well as areas that were not exposed to the gas. It was shown that pregnant women who were exposed to the hazardous gas had a much higher rate of spontaneous abortions in comparison to those who were in the control group, who were not exposed to the gas.

According to data from the National Centre of Biotechnology Information, India, a total of 3,800 individuals lost their lives on that night. Most victims resided in the nearby slum area known as 'Basti.' This official figure, however, significantly underestimates the actual death toll, which was informally said to be several times higher.

Nearly forty years later, Bhopal still feels the lingering effects of the devastating blow inflicted by the murderously selfish US firm that controlled the pesticide facility and has never admitted any wrongdoing. UCC CEO Warren Anderson, who arrived in India shortly after the leak and was subsequently arrested, was held accountable, but so were the people who had turned a blind eye to the plant's extremely inadequate safety standards. Even after decades of court fights, the victims have received meager recompense.

## Scientific Challenges and Lessons for the Future

The continuous soil pollution by chemical wastes placed at the Union Carbide India Limited site may have supplemented genetic alterations by interaction with other biological and biological elements. "Even after more than three decades, there is still the issue of providing rehabilitation and proper health monitoring to the children who were born disabled because of the gas tragedy, as well as to the parents who live in water-contaminated areas. The chemical industry and government must properly oversee the maintenance and regular check-ups of chemical technology machinery and refineries operating throughout the country, and a government initiative is required to clean up the hazardous environment. It is

regarded as one of the most terrible industrial disasters in history, but Bhopal is still mourning. A new generation born to those who survived the disaster has been afflicted and considered to have birth deformities. It would not be incorrect to conclude that the surviving generation acquired the Bhopal Gas Tragedy's poisoned genes.

*The Railway Men* is a commendable effort that restores an expansive, old-fashioned storytelling style to a still-relevant event that we risk forgetting. It also recalls a syncretic India: the poisonous gas made no distinctions based on class, caste, or religion, and those doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation at significant risk to themselves did not pause to inquire whether the individual gasping for breath was Hindu or Muslim.

Overall, the web series received positive feedback from critics and the audience. On IMDb (Internet Movie Database), it scored an 8.5/10 rating based on more than 6000 reviews, and on Google audience rating summary was 4.5/5 based on 850 ratings. With its initial release on November 18, 2023, the series ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> for two straight weeks in the "Netflix Global Top 10" for Non-English TV (November 20, 2023 - November 26, 2023, cycle), and it is trending across 36 countries with 4.6 million views and 18.1 million hours of viewing.

So many users reviewed that to see shows start on new paths only to end up going down the same old paths. The pace quickly turns to theatrics. It takes over the need to show how solid human courage is. People make fun of US stakeholders, but people at home are rarely questioned about how careful they are. There are over-the-top shots of news clips and newspaper clippings from the time of the accident. Following a depiction of that dreadful night in a picture, the show recreates it. There is a desire to base the making on actual study and journalism. The real world will always be better than the movies, but there is still truth in fiction (Das, 2023; Khosla, 2023).

Investigative journalism in *The Railway Men* played an important role in plots and character development by adding layers of complexity, intrigue, and realism to the Bhopal gas tragedy. Incorporating investigative journalist Kumawat into a series' overall plot not only added excitement and mystery but also provided an opportunity to explore complex themes and characters in a way that resonates with the audience. It gives lessons and learning to those audiences and budding journalists who want to pursue career opportunities in Investigative journalism.

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