**Writing the disaster: substance activism after Bhopal**

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In 2008, survivors of the 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster in India undertook a 500-mile march to New Delhi, protesting a long history of governmental neglect of the survivors of the event. This is one episode of a 25-year-old organized international campaign that continues in the present. This article examines the ways in which three bodily substances – blood, hearts and ketones – were produced and circulated through the 2008 protests. Placed within a broader history of substance-politics in the region, this article suggests that these protests produced an imagination of bodily substances that surfaced messy contradictions that became difficult for the Indian State to disregard. This article also shows how these protests distanced themselves from the cynicism attached to similar modes of corporeal activism in the contemporary Indian landscape. In sum, this article traces the production of an activist corporeal counter-discourse that, for at least a time, contaminated the procedures through which the Indian State disregards the health of its marginal citizens.

Keywords: South Asia; substance; activism; biopolitics; Bhopal

In 1984, a poisonous cloud of methyl isocyanate leaked out of a negligently maintained Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. Over the course of the night, the gas cloud quickly engulfed the slum settlements that surround the factory, leading to the immediate death of over 2000. In an essay written soon after the event, Rajagopal showed how the disaster overwhelmingly affected the marginalized inhabitants of the city that lived in squatter settlements and worked in the informal economy (1987). He further demonstrated how the Indian State’s response was structurally inhibited, as it chose to underplay the disaster and minimize political fallout that would compromise its relations with powerful multinationals. Das’ work on the legal aftermath of the disaster traces the Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster Act of 1985, through which the Indian Government cannily took on the responsibility of speaking for the survivors (1995). Through this maneuver, the government took away the legal right of the survivors and their organizations to be heard, leading to a highly controversial settlement between the government and the offending corporation – Union Carbide. Several commentators have judged the settlement of $470 million to be a fraction of what is owed to the survivors of the disaster. Equally egregiously, this same settlement granted immunity to the corporation from future legal liabilities. Fortun’s work explores in detail the hopes and frustrations of the advocacy that has played out in the backdrop of the continued complicity between the Indian State and the refusal of responsibility by multinational corporations.
(2001). Union Carbide and its new owner – DOW Chemicals – have both continued to evade responsibility for the tragedy; the site upon which the survivors have no choice but to continue to live remains toxic and the groundwater poisoned. In the last 24 years, more than 20,000 have succumbed to the slower effects of the poison and about 100,000 more have been left with varying degrees of disability and impairment. In addition, about 40,000 people experience second-generational effects, as well as new health morbidities arising from the contaminated ground water. The government has continued to delegitimize second-generation injuries, refusing to recognize newer symptoms and to expand the category of the victim. Further, it has failed to provide adequate healthcare, rehabilitation or even clean drinking water to those already categorized as survivors. Faced with these circumstances, the survivors have organized several highly charged and widely networked international ‘campaigns for justice’ (for an overview cf. Hanna, Morehouse, and Sarangi [2005]). Five such survivor organizations come together under the broad umbrella of ‘The International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB)’. The overall thrust of the ICJB’s efforts has been to try and establish legal and ethical precedents that could prevent future acts of corporate negligence against the third-world poor. Further, in the vicinity of the chemical plant, the survivor-activists have set up a health clinic that provides free care, while simultaneously warning against excessive pharmaceutical use for chronic conditions that do not lend themselves easily to pharmacological management. This is consonant with the broader tenor of the activist movement; its ongoing effort has been to link the original disaster of 1984 to the abuses of multinational chemical and pharmaceutical companies in the present (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Bhopali activist donates blood that will be used as ink for writing a letter of protest to the Indian Prime Minister.
Source: Courtesy – The International Campaign for Justice for Bhopal.
Writing-with-blood

This article will draw upon ethnographic work in 2008 with survivors and activists who walked 500-miles from Bhopal to New Delhi and set up camp at Jantar Mantar. Built around a historic observatory, Jantar Mantar is a street in New Delhi designated by the city administration as the space within which groups can make public displays of civil dissent.

In their plans, the activists had anticipated a stay of at most a couple of months in the city. After the government repeatedly denied an audience to the organization’s representatives, they gradually came to the conclusion that the government was even less predisposed to give them a fair hearing than they had thought. Two months ultimately turned into half a year at the protest site. During this time, the address from the second-generation survivors took on a particularly powerful form. Born after the disaster, a generation of Bhopali children has since grown up with genetic impairment and in the presence of environmental contamination. Through the course of this 2008 campaign, these children activists organized several sets of demonstrations. Amongst these actions, two particularly caught my attention.

The first demonstration occurred early on in the course of the ICJB’s stay at Jantar Mantar. At the site, blood was collected through syringes from both the children activists and older survivors at the protest site. This blood was stored in a set of container vials. The Bhopali children then used this blood as ink for a kind of political writing. With this blood ink, Sarita, Shweta and Yasmin, three girls in their early teens who continue to be at the forefront of the campaign, wrote a letter to the de facto address of political power – the Prime Minister of India. In a courteous tone unmistakably tinged with sarcasm, the letter asked the current Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh for a long denied face-to-face appointment. While the addressee of the letter was the Prime Minister, its audience however was more broadly conceived. The moment of the taking of blood was dramatized by red headbands, photographed and captioned later with aggressive messages such as ‘Look into our Eyes, Prime Minister’. These photographs, taken by the activists and also by supporters such as myself, were later distributed through the campaign’s own website and made available to local news agencies. The activists hoped that the public attention that the letter was designed to receive would work as a shame tactic, forcing the central government to recognize the presence of the protest in the capital. The children then personally carried this letter-in-blood to the residence of the Prime Minister and after much wrangling with security, had it sent in via emissaries (Figures 2 and 3).

Part of the letter reads:

Dear PM, We are people poisoned by Union Carbide. We have walked more than 800 km just to meet you. For the last 19 days, we have been sitting at Jantar Mantar. Would you please take one hour out of your busy schedule to meet us at Jantar Mantar? That is all I wanted to say. (On behalf of the Bhopal Victims – Yasmin Khan, on behalf of Bhopal Survivors)

If this demonstration involved the dispersal of blood, another concerned its circulating organ – the heart. Following the writing-with-blood campaign, a group of eight Bhopali children traveled to youth workshops, residential welfare associations and local slums, recounting the story of Bhopal and of persistent governmental neglect. After explaining the complexity of the issue and the seriousness of their concerns to fellow young teenagers, they would then ask for volunteers to cut out large paper hearts of various colors. Once several such hearts had been carved out, the children volunteers would summarize what they had just learnt and pen a letter on the heart to the Prime Minister, urging him to take heed of the activist-children and their plight. The name of the campaign gives away its affective ploy. The ‘Have a Heart, Prime Minister’ (in English) campaign was built
Figure 2. A Bhopali activist writes a letter-in-blood to the Indian Prime Minister. Source: Courtesy – The International Campaign for Justice for Bhopal.

Figure 3. Vials of blood collected from Bhopali activists for the blood writing campaign. Source: Courtesy – The International Campaign for Justice for Bhopal.
on the explicit idea that these carved hearts were replacement hearts for the Prime Minister’s obviously malfunctioning organ. If his heart had indeed been in its place, it would not have allowed him to turn a deaf ear to the suffering of the activist-children. The conceit of this campaign was again loaded with sarcasm; it entailed medical assistance from the poor Bhopali children who had been deprived of promised treatment. In a powerful and playful philanthropic gesture, the poorest and most medically deprived extended support to the person they saw as responsible for their deprivation. Echoing the theme of the writing-with-blood campaign, the heart donation demonstration pointed to the failure of a sought after relationship of protection and care between the Indian Government and the children of Bhopal (Figure 4).

How are we to best understand and take heed of these modes of politicized corporeal deployment? In his famous analysis of the historical shifts in the techniques of power in Europe, Foucault suggests that a crucial aspect of modern regimes are their movements away from a previous symbolism of blood where sovereigns exercised a right over death through spilling blood, while also maintaining an interest in its purity through managing its lines and boundaries (1979). Stoler’s subsequent correctives pushes us beyond the periodization, reminding us of how the imaginary of blood within politics both exceeds race, and persists in several forms into the present moment (1995). Indeed, Anidjar’s recent essay on a political genealogy of ‘blood’ traces a persistent affinity between blood and politics, arguing that ‘communities of blood have served and free-refilled, at different times supplemented, fashioned and preserved, the competing forms of our political hematology’ (2011). My ethnographic attempt at tracing a ‘political hematology’ takes as its starting point...
object the disavowal of a political relationship – between state and citizen – and an attempt at its public reinscription by an activist imagination. In their own ways, Foucault, Stoler and Anidjar provide clues to a doubleness in political imaginations of blood – its act of spillage as a marker of violent sovereign distinction on the one hand and its marker of a bounded relationship of an inside/outside on the other. One reading might argue that the gesture of writing-in-blood here draws from both resonances. First, there is a disjuncture opened up between the symbol of blood with its connotation of powerful sovereign violence and the tone of the actual address – voiced in the plaintive tone of a child. Second, the act of writing-with-blood demonstrates the failure of a political relationship: the State’s refusal to recognize the biological harm of this group of citizens. Writing-with-blood, if blood has served in the past as a marker of political community, marks and makes public fissures in the exclusions that have been enacted in the present.

My effort in this article, however, is to describe a more local imagination of the relationship between politics and bodily substance. How might we go about tracing this genealogy? Marriott’s notion of the ‘dividual’ person stressed that to understand personhood in India, scholarly frames needed to move beyond the idea of a person as a bounded, discrete whole, and instead account for how they were made up through transactions of substances such as blood, and the codes that regulated their movements across caste, gender and generation (1976). Anthropologist Cohen resituates Marriott’s ‘dividual’ flows into the landscape of a specifically postcolonial, scientific and medicalized world of blood transfusions and transplantations (2001, 2003, 2005). Cohen demonstrates how older networks articulate with the new, as modernity decodes and recodes old forms of biosociality. For instance, he writes of blood groups replacing caste coding in a new imaginary of citizenship that is animated by new modes of biosociality. To demonstrate this, Cohen examines the recurrent theme of blood transfusions in early postcolonial Hindi cinema. The recurrent trope in this cinema is a new mode of secular alliance making made possible by new biosocialities of blood groupings. This takes place in the political economic backdrop of Nehruvian politics, whose animating force was the twin rhetoric of a secular and scientific citizenry that could move beyond the stultifying effects of older caste and religion-based social networks. Cohen traces this further into post-liberalization India that opened itself up to transnational flows of capital. This imaginary finds its way into cinema as well, but in a very new form. The trope that emerges now is that of the poor family under duress that must sacrifice body organs in order to keep alive familial kinship bonds. The older biosociality of blood transfusion allowing for the imagination of a broad, cohesive citizenry is replaced by a new configuration of organ sacrifice and debt under enormous economic constraint.

Thus, Cohen usefully points out the symbolic valence of blood and organ transplantation as it emerges in postcolonial India. The Bhopal case resonates powerfully with the broad conditions of an increasingly class-bifurcated access to medical care in India (cf. Balarajan, Selvaraj, and Subramanian 2011; Das and Hammer 2007; Sengupta and Nundy 2005; Visweswaran 1988). One of the primary demands of the campaign has been effective and universal government-supported health care for the victims. Till the present, government hospitals in Bhopal (both those that precede the disaster and those that set up with the post-disaster settlement money) are much more concerned with attracting private patients than treating the victims of the disaster who were assured free long-term medical care. Cohen has demonstrated how similar conditions of duress animates a conception of sacrifice and debt in other places in India, as the poor give up their organs for temporary financial relief (2003). In his more recent work, Cohen puts this imagination of sacrifice in relation with the curious fact that in the twenty-first century, the deaths of political figures in India have been increasingly framed as ‘organ failure’ in the region’s
clinical political reportage (2011). Attached to the sovereign power of political officials, the diagnosis of ‘organ failure’ points not only to a condition of lack, but also to a possibility of excess – of being able to excessively claim and demand the surplus organs of citizens for whom sacrifice is already imaginable. The political gift of the Bhopali organ is a critical intervention into this double imagination of sovereign power and organ sacrifice. In the specific context of Bhopali activism, the gift from a child to the Prime Minister – from the politically ‘naïve’ to the highest functionary of the state – occurs in a context where the organ functioning of a new generation of gas victims is at stake. The government medical establishment has gone as far as to completely deny several forms of physiological and psychological impairment in second-generational survivors. Pointing to a dysfunction in the organ functioning of the functionary that is ultimately responsible for this judgment is a powerful gesture. My interpretive understanding (bolstered by my exposure to the broader rhetoric of this and several other campaigns) sees this gesture as a practical critique of a bi-moral pathology, one that is understood to afflict the government but not the survivors. Living with bodies that have been marked chronically by those they hold responsible for the poisoning (a deaf government as much as a negligent corporation), the survivors suggest that there is a pathology even more debilitating than the ones they live with – i.e. the bi-moral pathology of neglect and corruption. The survivors’ politics then might be understood as a politics of exposure, an unraveling of a long, hidden history of denial and culpability. While their own lives are a testament to forge moral and meaningful lives in the face of stark impairment, they take pride in that this form of life is at least more virtuous than the disrepair of the body politic – literally congealed in the metaphor of the Prime Minister’s heart. This conjunction of moral valence and bodily substance animates the writing-with-blood strategy in an equally powerful way. The metaphor of blood then attempts a mode of biosocial relationality between the poor, a neglectful government and a criminally culpable corporation. As Cohen has shown, transfusion gives way to desperate transplantation in the globalized postcolonial imaginary. The drawing of blood here is a kind of desperate gesture that is more akin to the sacrificial and coerced forms of organ transplantation under conditions of structural violence. Blood takes on a valence that points less to the possibilities of a cohesive, undivided citizenry and more to the practices of class segregation and unequal access to medical care and resources in the context of a post-liberalization India. In both its dramatic appeal for media attention and its symbolic invoking of bodily contamination and violence, blood as medium reinforces this political message with a particularly unique strength. If the government pushes the poor into necropolitical zones of abandonment, consigning particular populations to the status of the living dead, writing through blood hopes to counter such a practice of invisibility by literally writing the substances of the body into the widest possible domains of the public sphere.

The writing-with-blood campaign occurs not in isolation, but in the context of several such sanguinary deployments in India. Copeman’s recent work has taken as one of its central themes precisely this proliferation of blood writing in the Indian landscape of political enunciation and address. In a very recent piece, he describes the work of a specially formed samiti which through blood portraitures seeks to revivify the sacrifices of pre-independence nationalist martyrs (Copeman 2013). This work memorializes a species of violent nationalist sacrifices in the name of the nation that the samiti finds to be in danger of being forgotten in the future-oriented political imaginary of contemporary India. Copeman shows how blood writing can make appeals to an ‘enactive remembering’ with a call to its contemporary and future emulation. Placing these portraitures alongside the narrower political vision of the Hindu right in the region, Copeman demonstrates that in such blood portraitures and writing ‘in addition to being an ascetic demonstration of bodily commitment,
there is also a threat of further bloodshed’ (2013, 164). My fragments from the Bhopali demonstration also point to a form of ‘enactive remembering’, but the object of memorialization lends a very different potential to both the technique and its imagination of the future. If for Copeman’s samiti the task is a revivification of a sacrificial nationalist fervor, for the Bhopali activists the hope is to call the exclusionary politics of nationalism into question. That which is ‘enactively remembered’ here is the poisonous quality of a toxic bodily violence enabled by the State. Thus, the appeal through blood must enact a set of slippages that disables its resonance with nationalist fervor, a valence that Copeman wonderfully shows as proliferating in discourses of blood sacrifices for the nation. Of course, the force of this appeal does gain something through an invocation of the powerful trope of blood sacrifice. However, I have tried to show here how the form of Bhopali sanguinary politics opens up a critical distance between the imagination of organs and substances and its sacrificial spillage/donation in the service of the nation-state.

The hunger strikes

The second form of activist action I now describe is an indefinite hunger strike that was led by the two activist leaders of the movement – Satinath Sarangi and Rachna Dhingra. Seven other long-term activists supported this strike. Between the time the strike was announced and its commencement, the police had already arrested some of the protesters and placed them in custody in Tihar Jail – a high-security prison facility at the outskirts of the city. Two of the arrested had been designated as hunger strikers, and they now began their hunger strike from within jail. Simultaneously, seven others began fasting at the protest site. The only nourishment they allowed themselves was water mixed with hydration salts – a concession to the scorching heat of the Delhi summer. The veteran hunger strikers among them told me how the first few days were the most difficult. If one could tide over the first five days, the body stopped producing the sensation of hunger.

The next three weeks were amongst the most trying in the entire campaign. By the second week, the bodies of the hunger strikers had begun to produce ketones, a substance that I will go on to trace as crucial to the formulation of this activist hunger strike. Ketone bodies are compounds produced by the body when carbohydrate intake drops dangerously. They assist in the metabolic breaking down of fatty acids for energy in states of fasting and starvation. While ketones are not known to be harmful by themselves, prolonged production can lead to ketosis or ketoacidosis – conditions where ketone production has reached dangerous and unregulated levels. After three weeks, these conditions could lead to a variety of possibly fatal complications, including the disastrous consequences of protein metabolism. This report from the 13th day of the hunger strike shows already dangerous levels of ketone production among two of the hunger strikers at the Bhopal site.

<table>
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<th>S. no.</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Blood glucose (mg/dL)</th>
<th>Urine pH</th>
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<tr>
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<td>67</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>Jabbar Khan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>6.5</td>
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<td>(6)</td>
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<td>(7)</td>
<td>Gabbar Singh</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>Abdul Rafiq</td>
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<td>137</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>Satinath Sarangi</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>123</td>
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Note: Biochemical investigation results, 22 June 2008 (13th day of fasting).
Thus over these weeks, the hunger strikers allowed their bodies to produce a substance that simultaneously kept them alive and could lead to their death. The levels of this toxic product – ketones – were recorded meticulously every day by a roster of doctors who had agreed to come to the site to monitor biomedical measures. Medicalization of the hunger strike was absolutely a key for the hunger strikers: it proved the authenticity of their hunger strike as well as called attention to the danger to their lives – a tactic that aimed at attracting governmental attention (Figure 5).

Why am I introducing this hunger strike in a discussion on substances and political corporeality? In his piece in this volume, Copeman understands the affective efficacy of political blood portraits as obtaining from ‘[t]he de-metaphorised portrait’s material composition from a substance delivered, literally, from the heart, and partaking of the sentiment it embodies and produces[…]’ (this issue, insert page number post setting). These portraits, literally ‘from the heart’, appeal then to the sincerity of the form of its writing, as well as the subversion of the strict ritual codes that regulate the exchange and flow of bodily substances in the region. In the same piece, Copeman addresses the relationship between two political techniques – fasting and blood extraction.

Fasting and blood extraction are interesting analogues. Both enact a kind of corporeal emptying that would, in excess, result in death. Both couple physical self-subjection with the infliction of the image of this on others. Political blood extraction thus conceptually connects with the political hunger strike. But it also departs from it. If fasting instantiates a kind of active passivity that moreover is subject to accusations of sleight of hand, blood extraction is a physical action the veracity of which (in terms of its visible demonstrability) is less contestable. (insert page number post setting).

While making this distinction, however, Copeman crucially shows its temporal tenuousness. He shows how blood extractions too over time come to fall under accusations of a ‘dissembling’ political form; over time, its physical reliability loses force as it
multiplies and opens up to the same suspicions and accusations that now plague the techniques of the hunger strike. I am suggesting here that the verification of the ‘truth’ of the hunger strike through a scientific enumeration of toxic ketones is a novel gesture that seeks to protect this activist strategy from proliferating accusations of sleight of hand. Fasting and blood extraction are brought closer together – as the former renders itself substantially visible and open to the same procedures of verification.

Finally, this self-induced toxicity brought to my mind the reason for this activism – toxicity in Bhopal that began with the night of poisoning in 1984 and continues till today in the bodies of its victims and in the still-contaminated environment they live within. The measurement of that toxicity is contested by the activists: the measures that were put forward by the government in the early years after the disaster fail to account for the varied ways in which toxicity had manifested itself and crucially delegitimizes the suffering of those in whom the effects have manifested much later – including second-generation consequences. Bhopali activism and hunger strikes take place in the shadow of this long history of toxicity and contested medicalization. The activists turn the supposedly private space of their own engagement with their bodies – the care of their own selves – into an insistently public site that mediates between themselves and others. I want to highlight here how ketones – in the role they play in authenticating the activist hunger strike – become a scientific mode through which a previous history of biomedical delegitimization is contested. During the strike, the body becomes a medium of communication, authenticated and disseminated through the medical document. One might imagine that it writes the logic of an industrial disaster onto the body of the activist striker. Let us understand the logic of the Bhopal disaster as a process that vitally disrupted the relationship that the victims might have had with their bodies prior to the disaster; in its stead, it instituted a new regime of afflictions that brought the sufferer’s awareness of bodily functions to an insistent and troubling awareness. Toxicity became a daily concern and became something that one had to negotiate without knowing how to or having the resources to treat. Governmental neglect teaches the activists to resort to hunger strikes, which then takes on an involuntary and inevitable logic that translates into one’s own body turning against oneself. The abject body of the gas victim is duplicated in the abjection of the hunger striker. While voluntary, it points to its involuntariness; in projecting this as a last but inevitable consequence of governmental neglect, the striker attempts to expose the fallacy of the body and its care as a private non-political space. Rather, the hunger strike writes this privacy large upon the political arena, documenting it, transacting it and deploying it as a medium for a political message: the message is clear – it is to demonstrate how far the body has come from the possibility of meaningful care.

After 22 days and close to the imminent possibility of long-term medical damage to their bodies, the activists began a relay, with a fresh set of strikers taking over from the previous ones. Finally, after 172 days of relayed hunger strikes, the Indian Minister for Chemicals and Fertilizers arrived at the site with sweets for the hunger strikers and an announcement of an Empowered Government Commission that would look into Bhopal – a key demand of the campaign. Previous government commissions had lacked the ability to take immediate action, the introduction of the term ‘empowered’ encoded the promise of swift redress. Amongst this and other victories, the negotiated truce also put in place a plan to pursue legal and criminal liabilities of Union Carbide and Dow Chemicals (the current owner of the subsidiary), as well as a plan of action for the rehabilitation of the gas victims. While I do not have the space here to trace in detail the aftermath of this campaign, suffice to say that in practice, many of these negotiated declarations fell far short of their promise. This has led to repeated hunger strikes, actions and campaigns in recent
years, both in Jantar Mantar and in Bhopal; the story of governmental neglect and partial legal recognitions continues to unfold in the present.

Matter out of place

One of Copeman’s key insights in his recent work on bodily politics in the subcontinent has been to show how in the region’s caste-divided context, where the mixing of bodily substance is often anathema, the flow and address through blood bespeaks a strong utopian potential, drawing precisely from the negative power associated with substantial exchange. As he formulates it strikingly in the introduction to this issue: ‘Yet evidence of persistence of concerns about substances out of place – compelling as it is – is only one side of the coin, for subversions and reformulations of these concerns have come to form a locus of political promise […]’ (page number). What I find particularly insightful in this formulation is its explanation of the particular force of ‘substances out of place’ in the Indian context, where through a pharmakon-like gesture – techniques of substance-portraiture and writing inhere both the ‘truth’ of marginalization, as well as the promise of its subversion. As I have suggested, the substance-techniques of the Bhopali activists enact a further subversion: they undercut the association between blood and nationalism and between shedding and sacrificial devotion as it appears in the work of some of Copeman’s informants. If nationalist blood portraiture gain strength through an appeal to its material sincerity (literally ‘from the heart’), Bhopali activism pushes matter further out of place by contesting this manner of nationalistic truth production.

It does this not by rejecting ‘sanguinary politics’, but by pushing its inherent instability. If blood extractions and display have sought to memorialize and re-enact a violent ‘anti-Gandhian’ nationalist politics (Copeman 2013), the Bhopali activist renders this opposition between Gandhian fasting strategies and substance-politics moot. The novel Bhopal activist strategy of turning the hunger strike itself into a politics of verifiable ketone-substance mimetically doubles the toxicity. The hunger strike too is a politics of substance, rather than an act of passive non-compliance; it appears as an active form of mimesis that substantially recreates the biological and environmental toxic abjection within which the Bhopali survivor is forced to live. The ‘truth-force’ of substances then is generated not only in its imbrication of medium and message, of interiority and exteriority, but in its ability to produce a historical link between event and memory. In the broader ‘sanguinary politics’ of contemporary India, many kinds of nationalist gestures of giving, spilling and sharing blood contribute to both broad and narrow visions of a secular nation-state (as Copeman has shown us). The Bhopali gestures of writing-with-blood and inducing an abject form of toxicity through fasting, on the other hand, undermines a nationalist vision in which the event of the Bhopal disaster serves only as an embarrassment. By re-enacting and intensifying an original toxicity enabled and supported by a postcolonial state, the Bhopali substance-politics is dangerous because it is ‘matter’ historically ‘out of place’; it is poisonous and polluted precisely because it mimes an event that is being pushed out of national narratives. Thus, it violates not just caste–ritual codes of substance purity–pollution, but also the political codes of a new secular, future-oriented imagination in which substances are supposed to circulate in contemporary India.

Finally, there remains the question of the political substance as gift; that is, the form of intimacy, reciprocity and obligation such political substances demand of its addressee. In describing the powerful relational sway that blood images have to their addressee in a particular case of blood portraiture addressed to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha, Copeman writes: ‘Rather than augment her authority, the portraits demonstrate her essential
vulnerability when subjected to the relational industry of another. [...] The image was the occasion for a kind of relational binding; a blood-tie (page number). Copeman shows how the medium of blood coupled with an insistent articulation of a blood tie feeds into and intensifies existing idioms of intimate address in the South Indian political vocabulary. Here, I want to highlight Copeman’s insight that Jayalalitha’s vulnerability stems from an inability to control the medium of address, and that the power of the address draws from its ability to control the form of the ‘relational industry’. In the case of the Bhopali activists I have described here, the form of the relational industry through organs, blood and ketones multiplies its own force of address in a somewhat different way. For Jayalalitha to acknowledge a blood-tie with her painter-suppliant does not unfold a further threat, she may accede to it and allay her potential vulnerability. In the case I present, there is a much greater danger for the central government to acknowledge the relationality demanded of by blood, organs and ketones. This is because that which is being sought is precisely the acknowledgement of an organic, bloody and toxic materiality. The Bhopali attempt to establish a blood-tie places the government in a far less comfortable position; it contaminates. To acknowledge the hearts, blood and ketones as matter would be a contravention of the very fundamentals of their obligation to global trade and liberalization, obligations that keep them from holding the multi-national corporations responsible for the disaster culpable. These substances ‘out of place’ point not only to the force of substance as communication, but also point to an economy of recognition and misrecognition of substance-ties and the unevenly distributed possibilities of political intimacy.

Conclusion

Through the course of this article, I hope to have shown how a particular iteration of an activist discourse in India produces an imagination of bodily substances (blood, organs and ketones) that literally contaminates the Indian State’s practices of distancing and disavowal. This enforced relational bind between the activist and the State draws upon crucial resources in the imagination of substance and relation in the region, where imaginations of blood and organs have pointed both to the possibility of a cohesive citizenship, as well as to the conditions of political failures that produce bodily sacrifice, duress and debt. Yet, these activist gestures go further: not only do they bring to surface this history of abandonment, but they also produce their own procedures of self-verification. If similar modes of substance activism have become attached to a public cynicism toward its verifiability, the medicalization and documentation of the hunger strike that the Bhopali activists produce point to a novel inflection of this activist technique. As a form of verification, this strategy simultaneously undermines the truth-procedures through which the Indian State has continued to deny the contemporary relevance of the original disaster. Finally, while a politics that is articulated through the deployment of an abject body certainly runs the risk of its own extinction, here the Bhopali imagination points to an imagination of the future; it reinscribes bodies made abject, resists their neutralization and abandonment and invests them with dense coding that keeps them open to new and active political formations.

Notes

1. After these 2008 protests, the work of these second-generational youth survivors was formally recognized by ICJB through the formation of a new nested organization: Children Against Dow-Carbide.
2. Barthes suggests that a condition of our time is that sarcasm is now a possible condition of truth, a potential tool of critique (1972). That is, Barthes thinks of the linguistic device as a deconstructive mode within language that denaturalizes the normal function of language to naturalize bourgeois ideology. In a similar spirit, the sarcasm suffusing the blood letter and the conceit of the ‘have a heart’ campaign denaturalize the genre of the political petition, playing out within it the fissure between the promise and practice of political responsibility and care.

3. I am borrowing the term necropower from Mbembé, who uses the term to indicate forms of contemporary power that exercise the sovereign right to create zones of abandonment, thus creating conditions of life close to death where the lines between resistance/suicide and sacrifice/redemption are blurred (2003).

4. In popular culture, one may encounter this compound in popular ‘low-carb’ diets such as the Atkins – ketones are what cause weight loss when the body is deprived of carbohydrates.

References


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