

Kim Fortun: Bhopal

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Kim Fortun

I began working on environmental, problems and injustice at the very start of my research career. I had traveled to India for extended fieldwork, which is the key method in the kind of social science that I do cultural anthropology. so I went to do fieldwork in India where I thought that I would study, the beginnings of a new kind of environmental movement taking shape.

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Kim Fortun

There. So I thought that my research would be very forward looking, looking for new ways to protect people and community in India from all kinds of pollution, from factories, from pesticide exposures, from contaminated water. but when I arrived, I realized that I could actually help with the work in a very acute site of environmental harm. The city of Bhopal in central India, where they were, they were, taking a case of environmental, harm before the Indian Supreme Court.

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And it was a dramatic and terrible case. the Bhopal disaster occurred in 1984, in Bhopal, the result of the negligent operations of an American owned pesticide factory that was built with great promise to help India achieve food security by providing, pesticides that would yield, larger crops. but the plant, they didn't train their workers properly.

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They didn't keep their technology up to date. And so on the night of December 3rd, 1984, water was introduced into a very large storage tank of toxic chemicals. And there was an exothermic reaction, a heat reaction that led to the release of 40,000 tons of toxic gas over a sleeping city. Many of the people living nearby were very poor, so they didn't live in hard ware houses had very little protection.

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also, they didn't have an evacuation plan. So when they ran from their homes, often thinking people would bring chili peppers, they didn't know what was happening. They ran into the wind instead of away from it. They ran with small babies. They ran. People were crushed in the streets, but just falling because their eyes filled with the gas and they couldn't see, they were coughing and vomiting.

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And so it was a horrible night of environmental harm. Many thousands of people died immediately, and many died in the coming days. So many that there's not enough, and, good count of the dead in the immediate aftermath because people were buried or burned. in mass. So I came to India, not during that immediate disaster period, but in the years following where people were asking, how do we, bring justice to Bhopal?

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What kind of a lawsuit would, redress some of the harms, that occurred? And so I spent my years learning deeply about the case so that I could help represent it in the lawsuit. And what I learned was a story of many, many kinds of failures, engineering failures, failures of the government to provide adequate oversight to the, to the company failures and educating people that had quit training the workers in the way they had promised to do when the factory was established.

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So there are many, many, failures that kind of combined to produce the conditions that led to the breakdown in the functioning of the plant. That, in turn, harmed thousands of people. So I came away, humbled by the complexity of the problem. I continued to work in on the legal effort. It wasn't successful. The case was, settled out of court for an amount that worldwide, many, observers thought was unfair to the gas victims.

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It's about \$500 per person who had died. And minimum minimal parent, payments to the people who had lost their capacity to work just because they had had they had been injured. so the legal effort wasn't successful. You know, moneys have come in to Bhopal that have, helped some people, have more secure housing, build very small businesses.

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But the harms really have never been, redressed. And so that case has really stuck with me and motivated the rest of my career to really understand what breakdowns result in environmental harms.