

# BHOPAL GENOCIDE

Questioning  
the Path of Development  
Leading to Bhopals



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1984 - the year that snatched away people's lives by the hundreds and thousands in Assam, Punjab and Delhi ended with yet another dastardly and staggering mass murder - in Bhopal. People blinded by a huge cloud of poisonous vapour, choking and vomiting, and dropping dead from moving buses, bicycles and bullock carts - this was the scene in the city on the morning of the 3rd December. In the early hours of that Monday the Union Carbide plant ejected 40 tonnes of its killer gas into the atmosphere converting Bhopal into a virtual gas chamber. People residing in the bastis around the plant became its prime targets. This gassing by Union Carbide was followed by the abounding callousness of the government resulting in the wholesale devastation of the toiling masses. The dead and dying of Bhopal have a tale of horror and untold sorrow to tell.

## ACTUAL EPISODE: ELUSIVE ANSWERS

Even after two months of the fatal episode people are still in the dark as to its actual cause. Official agencies, administrative as well as scientific, have been coming up with one statement after another each contradicting the preceding one. Neither has the National Science Congress, held in January in Lucknow nor the International Symposium on Environment organised by the National Safety Council in Delhi early February shed any light on the Bhopal episode. Meanwhile, over two and a half lakh people who inhaled the poisonous gas live on the brink of death. They do not know what gas they inhaled, who is going to treat them and what is going to be their treatment. And the despair of those who have lost their kith and kin, shows that the toxic cloud has ruined the living also.

Basic facts regarding the impact of the leak on people are being concealed. To point out just one glaring instance, government figures of the death toll are 'over 2,000', or more generously 'over 2,500'. However, an eyewitness who saw it all happen and who survived death cites his experience of counting up to 3,000 dead bodies. Thousands of dead men, women, children and infants strewn all over the place - in the streets, bastis, hospitals, bus stand and railway station - this ghastly scenario sent people reeling and left them benumbed. But it hardly posed a problem to the government which stuck to its figures of certified deaths, obtained from the city's hospitals. The army, called out to "clean up", hours after the gas had leaked out, threw human bodies into the Narmada river as well as in forests outside

Bhopal. Who counted these? Further, what is the number of dead among the tens of thousands who fled from the huge white cloud? No official has bothered to answer such questions.

An area of over 40 sq km surrounding the killer plant was the worst affected area. In JPNagar, Kazi Camp, Kanchi Chhola and other bastis situated at a radius of 3 to 4 km from the plant, old people, infants and children were the hardest hit. Among the dead, 40% were children. The survivors, though outwardly not showing much sign of the impact, are incapacitated. Construction workers, stone-quarry labourers, vegetable and fruit vendors - able-bodied young men and women are all either sitting, gazing vacuously or lying in bed, with no idea of what to do in future. Women who used to roll bidies and earn for the family are in no state to work. Even cooking rotis has become an impossibility because the slightest whiff of smoke from the chulla pierces the eyes with searing pain.

#### GOVERNMENT ROLE: A STORY OF CRIMINAL CALLOUSNESS

Right from the beginning the official agencies and men in power played a role which can only be described as criminal. When a doctor in the Hameedia hospital proposed the use of sodium thiosulphate as an antidote to the poisoning, it was turned down by the higher-ups. The proposal was based on the detection of cyanide poisoning in the case of some initial autopsy reports. But medical expertise emanating from Union Carbide in the US vehemently denied any cyanide poisoning whatsoever and the director of Madhya Pradesh health services

promptly imposed a ban on the use of the suggested antidote, through a confidential letter. Very much later, after the initial toll of thousands and continued deaths for several weeks, it is now found that the gas patients are benefiting remarkably from injections of sodium thiosulphate. But earlier, even after it was explained that it will leave no side-effects on the patients and that there was no harm in trying it, the Carbide response was a curt 'no'. Add to this, the multinational's refusal to divulge any facts or information pertaining to the gas and a possible line of treatment, the situation becomes cruel beyond description.

But it is the role played by the Indian government - both Central and State - that stands unparalleled in its sheer callousness. On the morning of December 3rd a government announcement informed the people that those who live through the first 72 hours will have no after-effects at all! As regards water, air, vegetables, fish, meat, etc the authorities declared that all was safe and everything normal in Bhopal. But as this proclamation was made not on the basis of any test conducted on samples, it was immediately supplemented with advices such as 'boil water before drinking' and the like. Moreover, not only were fish and meat markets closed down in Bhopal, vegetables for upper class consumption were being brought in from towns and villages far away from the city.

With the ban on the use of a proper line of treatment, the poisoned people were given symptomatic treatment only: eye drops, cough syrup and pain killers were administered. Deaths continued to happen. People

who had locked up their houses and fled the gas chamber, upon returning several days later, just dropped dead when they opened doors. Those who did not die, had their vital organs seriously impaired. The eyes, brain, liver, lungs, kidneys and genitals have all been damaged in varying degrees. Over 2½ lakh people stand as hard evidence of this gruesome reality. And yet the government was keeping itself busy not in tackling the situation but in advancing hollow assurances that Bhopal had become normal. Senior government doctors (as well as 'leading' private ones) stated that there was not a single case of blindness. They went by the technical definition of blindness given by the World Health Organisation. This is quite in keeping with a government which has put an end to starvation deaths by advancing nice concepts like malnutrition and undernourishment. While people continued to perish like flies, Rajiv Gandhi flew in and declared that the Bhopal situation is safe.

#### CONDITION OF PEOPLE, LONG-TERM EFFECTS

The cold and hard reality in Bhopal today is that half of those affected by the gas are going to die a slow death within the coming five years. Abortions and still births are occurring at an alarming rate. Damage in the brain membrane of new borns has been found. Long-term effects of the poisoning are going to be there not just for the affected people alone but for those yet to be born as well. Instead of studying in depth the condition of the people in Bhopal and seriously engaging in

meting out the needed remedy, what are the authorities doing? They are perpetuating the macabre situation. Even the pittance of relief announced has not reached the people. Government media is churning out propaganda to make it seem that those who are suffering are not gas affected but are chronically ill people. The obvious aim is to build up pretexts for stopping even the paltry rations of wheat, milk, etc that pass for relief and compensation. Since medical help had never been extended, why even talk about it? And when the oppressed and exploited of the bastis raised their voice demanding proper relief and care, they received lathis. Demands for proper information relating to the whole episode were likewise put down by brute force. Activists working with and among the basti dwellers were thrown in jail. Intimidation and harassment were clamped on the people. Even old women were not spared - male police mercilessly beat them.

The press also toed the line drawn by the government. After an initial reporting of the "tragedy" the dailies in the country could find no news on Bhopal that was fit to print. The election scene was more to their liking to which they turned very soon. For quite some time they deliberately underplayed the gravity of what had happened. It was only much later, days after the smoke and dust from the election tamasha had settled down, that the press chose to cover, at least in part, Bhopal and the broader questions raised by it. Definitely, there exist concrete reasons behind such an approach.



## THE COVER-UP: ANTECEDENTS

What is on is a massive cover-up. And the drama of arrest and release of Anderson the head of the killer multinational; JRD Tata's and FICCI's condemnation of this step of the government - all fit into a specific pattern of what the people may expect in the prevailing order of things in this country. When years back, many voices were raised warning against the potential dangers of this killer plant the government ignored them. It even gave license to the multinational, bypassing the usual screening procedures, mandatory in the case of such hazardous industries. The company was adamant in flouting several of the requisite safety measures. Accidents, many of them serious, went on happening. Leakage of lethal gases was a normal routine and the basti dwellers were accustomed to it. To the various objections raised against locating such a hazardous factory in so thickly populated an area the government turned a deaf ear. In 1975 MN Buch the municipal administrator issued a notice to shift the unit, citing the fact that a dozen residential colonies around the factory made it a danger-prone situation. Buch was transferred, the factory stayed. When a journalist R.Keshwani raised the question of the hazards posed by Union Carbide through publishing a documented article in the press, he and members of his family were intimidated. Workers who raised the issue of safety in the plant through poster campaigns and struggles were threatened or dismissed. At least one worker Ashraf had died in a gas leak and a minimum of six such leaks have been recorded

in the period immediately preceding the latest. An inspection report prepared by the company itself identified several very serious lapses and lacunae in the plant safety system. However no corrective action followed. When the problem was raised in the State assembly the labour minister stated that phosgene was not at all poisonous. Also, as regards shifting the factory, it was made clear on the floor of the assembly that an establishment with investment running into crores of rupees was not a toy to be played around with. It was for nothing that the posh guest house of the multinational was at the disposal of a number of ministers; also several ministerial relatives landed lucrative jobs in Union Carbide.

#### "OPERATION FAITH": OFFICIAL SCIENTISTS' CALIBRE

After the massive gassing of December 3rd, another drama was staged - "Operation Faith". Although the government and a willing press kept saying that the process of neutralising the poison remaining in the plant is "100% risk-free" and that a team of Indian scientists headed by CSIR chief Varadarajan would be supervising the whole show, this turned out to be yet another lie. Firstly, instead of destroying the MIC chemically, which according to independent scientific sources would be a totally safe method, the scheme was to covert the gas into the pesticide Sevin! In other words, the killer plant would once again be working as usual. And no doubt the Carbide management must have had a say in deciding upon this plan. As it finally came out, the 'faith operation' was conducted not by the CSIR scientists at all. but rather by

the Carbide technical personnel themselves. Varadarajan was not even told how much MIC the plant had: from the initial figure of 15 tonnes it went on rising to the final one of 22.5 tonnes. The government's absolute lack of control was all too obvious. It was stated at first that no danger was there but if anybody wished to move out of his house, transportation would be provided. However, just before the operation began certain regions were demarcated and notified as "danger zones", and people asked to move. Another interesting revelation after this faith operation is that Mr Varadarajan who had vehemently and categorically denied the presence of phosgene in the leak, admitted that a certain percentage of phosgene had also leaked out.

#### CALLOUSNESS ABOUNDING: DENYING A CHANCE TO LIVE

But the authorities' attempt to hide all facts, records and data pertaining to the episode was the limit. It was not just that the Union Carbide files were sealed. Even day charts and medical records of patients admitted in hospitals were grabbed by the CBI on a daily basis. This led to a situation where doctors found it impossible to treat their patients. Also, discharged patients were not permitted to take with them any details of the treatment they had been given. Earlier, we already saw, the attempt to work out a proper line of treatment had been brutally scuttled; now with these measures, any possibility of providing systematic treatment and avoiding deaths vanished.

## CHEMICAL WAR RESEARCH: ARE WE GUINEA PIGS?

The seriousness of the episode assumes dark and sinister dimensions when we remember that Union Carbide, far from a simple firm manufacturing consumer goods like torch cells, anti-freeze, polishing wax, plastic wraps, and so on, is involved, in a big way, in the research and production of armament hardware. Huge war research projects, in particular in chemical weaponry, are run through this multinational company by US defense department. Studies brought out by progressive groups in the US have termed Union Carbide as "Enemy No.1" insofar as the dangers created by it for the people and their environment. In Bhopal itself the establishment of an R&D centre costing Rs 25 crores has raised several unanswered questions. It was said that the production operations at the Bhopal plant estimated at Rs 15 crores were incurring a loss. But this had not stopped the Central government from giving the requisite license to the multinational. Further, to the question what was the specific activity being carried out in this R&D facility the Indian government and its Department of Science and Technology have professed ignorance. According to a recent PTI report, a big seminar was held in Bhopal, early '84 which was attended by top world experts in the field of chemical and biological war research. Union Carbide had been an important sponsor of this event. Again, when the gas leaked in Bhopal, the first state security personnel to be deployed for clearing the streets were units of the Indian army. It is an open secret for some time now that the latter

has specially trained combat units for chemical warfare. All this, if anything, thrusts up front the real possibility of Union Carbide conducting research and experiment for finding out modern ways of mass murder of human beings. The recent denial by the government of India on this point, coming after the abject buffoonery exhibited by Varadarajans and DST officials - what is it worth?

In this context it is well to remember that all the imperialist monsters are pouring billions in stockpiling and perfecting weapons of mass murder and destruction. The American use of Agent Orange in Vietnam and the Soviets' resorting to chemical killers in Afghanistan have already been well exposed. It was reported a few years ago that over 300 people were killed in a chemical armament plant in the Soviet Union due to breathing anthrax. The point to grasp is that the affluent powers - be they of the West or East - are feverishly carrying out chemical war research, and that under the cover of transfer of technology to the developing nations, what is really transferred very often is hazardous research and experiment facilities related to such fields. Peoples of the third world, whose lives are 'cheap', are made guinea pigs. The cooperation and collaboration extended by the governments of the third world - which may be done overtly or tacitly - in such ventures is infamous.

## WHAT IS THE DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERN IMPOSED ON US?

The real magnitude and dimensions of the problem confronting us, however, flow directly from the very pattern or model of development under which we are entrapped.

Government propaganda flaunts a rosy image of a rapid growth economy, progressing apace. Today "India has the third largest number of scientific and technical manpower after the USA and USSR"; it "ranks among the major industrial nations of the world"; and its industrial growth rate of 4.9 per cent in the last five years is "higher than that of UK and USA". The green revolution, white revolution and what not are "working wonders" in the people's lives, the claim goes on. Improved seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, together with mechanised farming techniques, it is said, have resulted in self-sufficiency in food, and people's life is fast turning into a life of plenty. And finally, through manipulation of the so-called poverty line, the government has awarded itself the credit of bringing down poverty. But such populist and political gimmicks apart, what is the reality? What is the model of development that policy makers and decision takers in India have set forth and are going on implementing?

## WHITE & GREEN "REVOLUTIONS": MYTHS AND THE REALITY

Let us take a look at the so-called white or milk revolution. Dairy cooperatives have



been projected as the model for all-India development. Anand, manufacturer of Amul products, became a synonym for the success story of cooperatives using latest technology with the help of foreign aid. Pretty soon the same was introduced in other States too. However the aftermath has been anything but that being claimed by official agencies. For example, of the poorest families in Anand villages 75% are still in debt. Milk has nearly disappeared from rural consumption. The villagers produce milk - but for selling to cooperatives or private middlemen for urban supply. Snatching away the milk from the mouths of the already famished rural children the rural rich and city elites reap the benefits of this "revolution". Not only are the masses cruelly deprived of their traditional nutrients. Traditional life styles are also tampered with, thanks to the imposition of modern techniques of livestock rearing and feeding, processing plants and distribution chains. A good example is that of a cross-bred bullock. While increase in milk production is helped, a cross-bred bull is inferior and unsuitable for drought work. If large-scale cross breeding is resorted to, it is the small and poor farmers who suffer: since they depend on animal power for agricultural work, scarcity of drought cattle hits them most.

The green revolution exemplifies the ongoing process in its various aspects. A team of experts from Ford Foundation worked out and presented a package deal in the name of improving production and productivity in agriculture. The deal was accepted in toto by the Indian government, which ran it through. With modern inputs like High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, fertilisers

and pesticides the initial effect was indeed remarkable. Production shot up. The traditional farming techniques started getting displaced by mechanised ones. Apart from the fact that the benefits of this "revolution" too went only to a small section (who got transformed into 'gentlemen farmers'), the HYV technology had a dynamics of its own. First of all it was imposed from without, with total disregard for people's life-style, traditional diets and prevailing socio-economic and environmental set-up. Second, prices of seeds, fertilisers, tractors, power and other inputs went on fluctuating with every whim of the market whereas output prices of produce were fixed by the government. As the green revolution made inroads into Indian agriculture, the multinationals in agribusiness and farm technology sank their claws deeper into the all-India market. And this happened precisely when they were stuck with a glut in their products. Very soon however this product glut gave way to a glut in plant and technology. This was a natural upshot of the high pace of innovative development in the imperialist economies, and the obsolete technology and know-how (for which the home countries had no use) had to be dumped somewhere in the most profitable way. Once again, the claws reached down, and one could hear about India becoming self-sufficient in the production of fertilisers, pesticides, tractors, etc. The most recent example in this regard is the setting up of six new fertiliser plants in the country. Contracts for all the six went as turnkey projects to MNCs despite serious opposition from Indian research and planning bodies and scientists. It is not for nothing that big international financial agencies extend huge loans and credits to India. Directly, or through indirect pressures the superpowers dictate terms and conditions on dos and don'ts.



## DEEPENING DEPENDENCE

The most favourite argument advanced by Indian official agencies in justification of the ongoing flow of foreign capital and technology is that we need technology in the beginning since "we are backward". Going in for collaborations in public and private sectors was put forward as a necessary first step towards attaining self-sufficiency. But just as in the case of green and white revolutions, collaborations with MNCs and aid from superpowers and their agencies have invariably resulted in greater dependence - and the trend is picking up fast.

Take iron and steel. Bhilai, Rourkela and Durgapur were commissioned, stepping up production of a variety of steels. Knowhow was generated within the country. Yet dependence only deepened. Bokaro, Salem and Kudremukh which came after two decades are a testimony to this. We can see the same pincer-like grip in locomotives and most recently in automobiles. Recently a large scale import of diesel locomotives from European MNCs was dictated to by the World Bank; and a host of Japanese and European car makers are aggressively barging in, and existing Indian automobile companies are fast turning into their trading outposts.

Of course in the case of pharmaceutical industry the very question of exerting pressure on it is meaningless because most of the industry is directly owned or controlled by multinationals. So is the case with many of the agricultural products of India whose product market is almost fully in the grip of a syndicate of traders located in a few imperialist trading centres. Markets

like London determine the 'fate' of marine products, coffee, cardamom and a lot of other 'exotic' spices on whose production millions of Indians slog themselves to death.

#### 'DEVELOPMENT' : DEPRIVATION AND RUINATION

It is when we come to drugs, pesticides, etc that the very relevance of the ongoing 'development' imposed over us becomes questionable. Tens and hundreds of drugs and pesticides have been found to be positively harmful and dangerously poisonous to human beings. In most of the affluent countries their use is banned or production restricted. Of course, pressures exerted by environmental groups and worker-consumer safety movements have acted as a factor in this. However, the blood-thirsty MNCs, rather than being forced to put a stop to the production of such poisons for good, have found an easy way out (a way that suits them too well because of the fast pace of obsolescence of technology we mentioned earlier): dump the poisons or shift their production into the third world. People, in particular progressive doctors, scientists, students, etc, in the third world countries have fought against this cold-blooded perpetuation of murder. All the same the MNCs have been effective in thwarting such popular attempts because of the help they readily get from the governments and policy makers of these countries. The commercialisation and commoditisation of life, building up a consumer culture in an all embracing way, is one more offshoot of this whole process. As an example, gooseberry fruit at one time freely available in every Indian village used to provide the much required Vitamin C in abu-

ndance to the people. But of late we have C-tablets prescribed and rammed down our throats. Gooseberries, bought wholesale by firms manufacturing some end products (inaccessible to the common people) are getting scarcer and scarcer. Hundreds of more examples of such deprivation can be listed.

#### PESTICIDES: WHY THEY RESULT IN GENOCIDE

Right from the time and place of manufacture of pesticides, poisoning starts. Bhopal revealed the havoc potential of pesticides in a staggering manner. That is all. But pesticide use - handling, human intake through air, food and water - is killing us piecemeal, by the day and by the hour. According to a recent study made by a team of scientists the level of pesticide content in the blood and body fat of residents in and around Delhi has not only become alarmingly high, higher than tolerance levels permitted, but is the highest in the world. The study attributed this to the increasing use of DDT (banned in the West) and HCH during the last decade and its carry over in the food chain. The number of people falling prey to pesticide poisoning is astronomical especially in the third world. Conservative estimates put it at 5,000 deaths and 5,00,000 cases of poisoning annually.

Another aspect of HYV technology is this. The hybrid seeds which are irreversibly displacing local varieties (of rice for instance) are under the complete control of multinationals who have centralised research labs in places like Manila. Apart from the monopoly in seeds (which incidentally gives

the MNCs life and death grip over millions around the world), such seeds need specified fertilisers and pesticides, which are also under the control of MNCs. Local, traditional varieties of seeds that have certain inbuilt resistance to pests and other qualities enabling them to withstand adverse climatic conditions are fast disappearing for good. Also, biological pest control (like margosa leaves, certain species of animals or insects that are natural enemies of crop pests) is, for all practical purposes, being written off in favour of 'modern' techniques.

Modern science and scientific research can be carried out to find out ways of how to withstand adverse natural conditions - we can't dispute that. In fact research which can synthesize the traditional knowledge acquired over the ages with the latest findings of science ought to be carried out with a view to improving the people's lot. But the manner in which research is actually done today and technologies developed and put to use is based on the ideology of maximising profits for a select few. It is such a pursuit that in effect leads to destruction and deprivation for the millions.

## UNLEASHING AGGRESSION ON NATURE

The "new" technology in agriculture is unleashed indiscriminately and in the most aggressive ways. A lot of studies have shown how this process is destroying (or has already caused irreversible destruction of) our natural environment. In this regard, the massive famines recurring in the

Sahel region of Africa and the process of desertification (Sahara is expanding at an alarming rate) killing off people in their millions have been traced to the barbaric plunder carried out by the European colonialists. Cultivation of traditional crops that used to feed the African masses was forcibly stopped and vast tracts of fertile land were converted to cash crop growing in the colonial period. The results were the rapid depletion of soil fertility plus a number of other adverse effects on environment and nature. At present a section among the aid-givers in the affluent countries are hotly arguing for launching the green revolution in Africa. This is the only way, they say, to "make Africa self-sufficient in food" but by now we ought to know the real motive behind such utterances.

#### BUILT-IN FEATURES OF PRESENT PATTERN

Behind introducing soya bean cultivation in a big way (for example in Madhya Pradesh), behind growing eucalyptus plantations in a massive scale after brutally cutting down forests, behind turning rice crop areas into rubber plantations, etc, etc, we can find a specific, distinct pattern of development. The built-in features of this pattern are: disruption and an adverse tampering with of people's lives pushing them deeper and deeper into poverty and deprivation; destruction and damage of nature and people's environment setting the stage for greater catastrophes - as experienced so nakedly and staggeringly in Bhopal; deepening dependence and bondage to foreign capital and technology leading very rapidly to a state of total lack of control over our own destiny.

## THE REALITY, AND THE FIGHT NEEDED

So then this is the grim reality dressed up in the garb of progress and growing plenty. To tackle it, in order to be able even to start a serious fight against this model imposed and implemented against our true interests, the first necessary condition is that we have the right to know. But even this basic right is being denied to us by the authorities. For example, when in Nagda (MP) the Chambal was turned into a carrier of deadly poison by the Birlas, people demanded an end to this dastardly crime of killing and maiming men, women and children. The people were brutally suppressed not just by the goon force of the Birlas alone, the illive government also threw its full weight behind this murderer. Even an anti-pollution activist who was elected with a massive majority by the people of Nagda was externed from the area under a flimsy pretext by the authorities. The Chipko movement and the more recent Apiko movement in Karnataka also have pointed out whose side the government is on. The tribal people of Bihar who successfully conducted an agitation against the Koyla-kara dam project (which would have all but wiped them out) as well as the people of Kerala who stopped the government from destroying the Silent Valley forest have taught us the need for an ongoing fight to defend the people's livelihood and for a safe environment.

The government, their media and departments regard knowledge as their monopoly. Through a series of acts, laws and rules they keep facts and other information away from us. We do not know for example what are the chemicals used, what reactions and

processes employed and what are the products and their uses in the case of the factory next to our homes, in the factory where we work. But as in any example, this example also points out only a limited view of the problem confronting us. The actual problem indeed is the model of development set out; and it is the people's right to know, debate and decide whether this model is the best suited to their genuine interests. For instance how to take care of pests in our fields? Is the western find, 'pesticides' the one and only answer? Have we not, through ages of cultivating a rich variety of crops in our land, handled this problem and acquired much knowledge? Should we not ourselves debate and take decisions incorporating the best in our traditional techniques and supplementing inadequacies with modern devices and methods? Is this not the true meaning and content of democracy and independence as a people?

But to raise even this question (or such questions) today means to be up against an established order of things in which the ordinary people have no real say in any significant way. Our lot is to look up to men at the helm of affairs for decisions and slog to a slow death. For the rulers of this country are set on a particular way of doing things and all that they demand from us is just one thing: Talk less, Work hard. If someone refuses to acquiesce, they have ways of "bringing him around". The plain truth is that with enormous economic and political powers concentrated in their hands the rulers are determined to ram down our throats their model of development.

Bhopal ought to have raised some misgivings, at least, in the minds of the rulers.

It didn't. Now it is up to us. Either we learn from Bhopal and teach its lessons as widely and deeply as possible so that as a people we can challenge and fault "the way things are" and fight for an alternate model. Or, after a period of 'feeling' about the "worst industrial disaster in the world" we can forget and go on with the motions of life. The choice is ours.