First published in 1988, *The Bhopal Syndrome* documents one of world’s worst industrial disasters: The Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984. The tragedy exposed a variety of issues plaguing rapid development such as the negligence of corporations and government, prioritizing of commercial benefits over human lives, inadequate post-disaster rehabilitation and compensation, and frightening levels of environmental pollution. The author argues that the Bhopal gas tragedy is being replicated across the globe at various intensities facilitating a dangerous normalisation. He asserts that workers and consumers should fight for their ‘right to know’ about working conditions, chemicals used in pesticides, the harm caused by producing such chemicals, how these chemicals end up on our food as well as the manner in which the chemicals interact in our body. Climate crisis and undeterred industrial development still haunt our reality making this book an essential read for any concerned citizen and for students of disaster management, industrial disasters, climate change, environment, toxicology and workers’ rights.
The Bhopal Syndrome
Pesticides, Environment and Health

David Weir
The Sierra Club, founded in 1892 by John Muir, has devoted itself to the study and protection of the earth's scenic and ecological resources—mountains, wetlands, woodlands, wild shores and rivers, deserts and plains. The publishing program of the Sierra Club offers books to the public as a non-profit educational service in the hope that they may enlarge the public's understanding of the Club's basic concerns. The point of view expressed in each book, however, does not necessarily represent that of the Club. The Sierra Club has some sixty chapters coast to coast, in Canada, Hawaii, and Alaska. For information about how you may participate in its programs to preserve wilderness and the quality of life, please address inquiries to Sierra Club, 730 Polk Street, San Francisco, CA 94109.

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Foreword

In the early hours of December 3, 1984, the city of Bhopal, India, was converted into a gas chamber, creating a holocaust unprecedented in the annals of man-made industrial disasters. Bhopal was expensive in human lives, in environmental damage, and in economic and social costs. It was unnecessary and avoidable.

Tragically, Bhopal is being repeated, not just as explosions, infernos, and deadly clouds heard, felt, and seen, the world over, but as “mini-Bhopals”—smaller industrial accidents that occur with disturbing frequency in chemical plants in both developed and developing countries. Even more numerous and deadly are the “slow-motion Bhopals”—unseen and
chronic poisoning from industrial pollution that causes irreversible pain, suffering, and death.

Also evident at Bhopal, and just as replicable, are the failures of both corporations and government bureaucracies to avert and control the incident; the scandalously inadequate emergency and medical responses; and the hopelessly inadequate post-event rehabilitation and compensation.

Like Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the catastrophe at Bhopal is a manifestation of something fundamentally wrong in our stewardship of the earth. Its ghosts will be with us forever, but we can and we must begin in earnest to stop what David Weir calls "the Bhopal Syndrome."

To do this, we need a new awareness, increased knowledge, and, most of all, the will to act locally and globally. We need actions that will go beyond mere "fire fighting" to directly confront and fundamentally rethink the present paradigms of development. We must move away from development strategies that are inherently violent, manipulative, and wasteful toward those that are humanized and ecologically sound.

We need to change the value systems of our industrial enterprises so that the health and safety of both people and the environment is paramount, superseding any technical or commercial considerations. We need to democratize technology to guar-
antee full disclosure about hazards. We need universal acceptance of the principles of “right to know” and “freedom of information” on health and safety issues.

Citizens’ groups are beginning to create this global conscience and will to act. The movement started with alarm about the almost total failure of industry, governments, and international agencies to curb the proliferation of hazardous pesticides, like those produced at Bhopal.

A worldwide citizens’ coalition of groups and individuals—the Pesticide Action Network (PAN)—is attempting to halt the spread and misuse of pesticides, particularly in Third World countries where the danger is greatest. PAN was formed in May 1982, following a conference in Penang, Malaysia, organized by the International Organization of Consumers Unions, and co-hosted by Sahabat Alam (Friends of the Earth) Malaysia. In 1985, PAN launched the international “Dirty Dozen” campaign, a public education effort coordinated by the San Francisco-based Pesticide Education and Action Project (PEAP), which targets 12 hazardous pesticides for global action. By late 1985, PAN participants were active through hundreds of groups in over 50 countries, emerging as a strong alternative mechanism through which concerned citizens can act.

The “No-More-Bhopals” network was inaugurated in 1985 at a Nairobi meeting on sustainable de-
velopment organized by the Environment Liaison Centre (ELC) and the International Coalition for Development Action (ICDA). Scores of groups, from the Citizens Commission on Bhopal in the USA and the Bhopal Monitoring Resource Group in Japan to the Kerala Peoples' Science Centre in India, have produced waves of popular action.

This book by David Weir takes us on a journey through many continents and shows us the pervasiveness of "the Bhopal Syndrome." The incisive reporting and masterful writing makes compulsive and even thrilling reading. Claude Alvares, one of India's leading journalists, has added a stunning personal account.

The revelations will shock many. Let us hope it stirs us out of any complacency that can so quickly settle in once an event has faded from the mass media.

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Penang, Malaysia
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INTRODUCTION

Our Need to Know

There are things we would rather not know about; yet we must know. What happened at Bhopal, India, in December 1984 is one of those things.

If the Bhopal disaster had been a once-in-a-lifetime event, it would be possible to ignore it, forget it, or assign it to that curious category called information of merely academic interest. But the Union Carbide pesticide plant that sent poison gases pouring into the air over Bhopal was much closer to all of our lives than we commonly realize. It was part of a worldwide food production system that affects nearly every person on earth. The potential for similar accidents occurring elsewhere is high. According to the Congressional Research Service, about 75 percent of
the population of the United States lives "in proximity to a chemical plant." Many of these factories manufacture pesticides; the United States is the top producer—and user—of pesticides in the world.

Ours is an age of environmental pollution. To survive as a viable species, we need to find solutions to many problems. The basic elements of life on earth—air, water, soil—are increasingly contaminated or otherwise compromised for future use. The tough and resilient web of plants and other animals, which sustains our existence, is now weakening strand by strand, and is in danger of eventually disappearing beneath us.

Above us, chemical pollutants from our everyday industrial and consumer activities have been blamed for opening a hole in the ozone layer of the earth's atmosphere. This hole is apparently growing—along with implications that are terrifying to consider, such as the possibility of millions of additional cases of skin cancer, deaths of many aquatic creatures at the larva stage, adverse effects on crops and other plants, and global climatic changes that would curtail human activity on earth.

There are additional problems. Small amounts of many different chemicals (as well as heavy metals) are embedded in the tissues of many living creatures, especially humans. We do not know what the health effects of these substances may be, but a frightening
new line of research indicates that the all-important yet poorly understood human immune system may be weakened due to exposure to chemical pollutants. To date, the work is preliminary and can be considered only suggestive, but again, the implications are frightening. A weakened immune response would leave us vulnerable to the many disease-causing viruses and bacteria that continue to evolve and mutate along with all life on the planet.

Our knowledge of these and other aspects of the ecological crisis we face, though fragmentary, far outstrips our current ability to do anything about them. A feeling of helplessness weighs down those who try to confront the terrifying issues of our time. Nothing symbolizes our apparent impotence better than the specter of the superpowers, armed with nuclear weapons and threatening to end the human debate, once and for all, over which political economy is the better scheme.

Distrustful of one another, posturing on a global stage, the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union seem to be incapable of finding the solutions we so desperately seek. Together they comprise two factions of a global power structure that excludes the vast majority of the world's people. Most human beings lead marginal lives under oppressive forms of social organization. Many people, rich or poor, have diminishing hopes for the future.