



# “HIT DOW WITH A BROOM!”

## Ecology Center’s Dow Campaign Travels to India

By Ted Sylvester • Photographs by Tracey Easthope

It was a very hot January day in Bombay when Tracey Easthope, Director of the Ecology Center’s Environmental Health Project, stood with hundreds of Bhopal women holding brooms above their heads in front of Dow Chemical’s corporate headquarters in India. The women chanted “Jhadoo Maro Dow Ko!” (which means “Hit Dow with a Broom!”). “The use of brooms,” explained Easthope, “refers to a punishment reserved for particularly bad behavior in the home, and is intended to bring shame on the company.” The action was one of the stops on Easthope’s recent trip to India as part of a delegation working on a global campaign to hold Dow Chemical Co. accountable for its products and practices.



*(Above) Bhopal: A doctor at the Sambhavna Clinic treats a women from the gas-affected community near the abandoned Union Carbide facility. (Left) Bombay: A demonstration at Dow Chemical's corporate headquarters.*

Several days before the demonstration, Easthope traveled to Bhopal, where her delegation toured the site of the world's worst industrial disaster. The trip culminated in Bombay, at the World Social Forum, and the demonstration against Dow. From a public health standpoint, Easthope saw much in India that made her despair. She also saw reasons for hope and found new insight and inspiration for her work back home.

Easthope, representing the Ecology Center, traveled with Dow Chemical activist Michelle Hurd Riddick from mid-Michigan's Lone Tree Council, Gary Cohen from the Boston-based Environmental Health Fund, representatives from the national organizations, Pesticide Action Network and Beyond Pesticides, and several others.

Easthope and the Ecology Center have been fighting Dow in Michigan for over a decade, and as they have sought to pressure the company into producing cleaner chemicals, they have found it more useful to network and coordinate efforts with Dow activists

around the world.

The group traveled to Bhopal in order to learn more about the ongoing effects of the 1984 Union Carbide gas disaster. The cleanup of the abandoned and contaminated Union Carbide pesticide factory and ongoing health needs of the gas-affected community became

a Dow responsibility, said Easthope, when the chemical giant acquired Union Carbide in 2001.

The group saw first-hand the pesticide factory responsible for almost 20 years of deaths and injuries, toured a non-profit health clinic set up for the gas-disaster victims, and met residents of the gas-affected community, including a women's collective of paper stationery workers. They also reunited and strategized with their colleagues who are working in Dow-impacted communities around the world, including members of the Bhopal-based International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB), and representatives from Vietnam.

### Factory of death

When Easthope toured the defunct 87-acre Union Carbide pesticide factory site she was amazed at its poor condition. It looked as if little had been moved since Dec. 2, 1984, when over 40 tons of poisonous methyl isocyanate gases leaked from the plant, initially killing 8,000 people and causing multisystemic injuries to over 500,000 people (the death toll from the gas disaster is now estimated at 20,000 people). "It was appalling," said Easthope. "We saw



*Bombay: The women of a small community.*



*Bhopal: Activists from Dow-impacted communities all over the world hold a press conference to announce the formation of a new Dow coalition and the upcoming demonstration at Dow's headquarters.*

mercury beads in the soil, open containers of DDT, a series of huge warehouses with uncontained bags of pesticides and pesticide ingredients laying around, a chemistry lab with bottles of chemicals strewn about, used plastic gloves, a leaking tank of who-knows-what, and an area where you sunk like quicksand in a tar-like substance.”

“We saw a hazardous waste containment facility,” she continued, “that was basically a cracked cement barrier only a few inches tall with just a little roof over the top of it like a carport. Even that inadequate structure had been won only by the Bhopal victims groups going to court.” The facility, Easthope pointed out, was located right next to a playground. Even though the site is guarded (another victory achieved by the victims), Easthope said there is plenty of evidence that both kids (graffiti) and animals (dung and hoof prints) have easy access.

Was she personally afraid of exposure to dangerous chemicals? “We were instructed to wear clothes that we could throw out or wash, and to decontaminate our shoes immediately after the tour,” said Easthope. “I think,

however, the most immediate concerns are of all those contaminants leaking into the groundwater or kids that don’t know better actually playing or animals grazing or otherwise coming into direct contact with these materials.”

“Visiting the former Union Carbide factory,” said Easthope, “makes it even harder for me to understand why Dow doesn’t do *something* to remediate the problem – provide funds to the Indian government so they can take care of the poisons that are still sitting around open – why they don’t do some kind of remediation of the contamination underneath the facility so that the groundwater is no longer being contaminated, or at least ensure that people are receiving safe water piped to them from another source?”

Easthope also toured the poor community surrounding the factory, and learned of the ongoing nightmare of contaminated drinking water – another legacy of the factory.

### **Clinic of hope**

While in Bhopal, Easthope also toured the Sambhavna Clinic. Located west of the now closed UC factory, it is

open six days a week except on holidays. Every day 40 to 100 persons visit the clinic. Most are from the communities that were severely affected by the disaster. The clinic opened in Sept. 1996 and is run by the Sambhavna Trust whose stated objective is improving the welfare of gas disaster survivors through medical care, research, health education, and information dissemination.

The clinic is housed in a two-story building renovated by volunteers. There is a waiting room, registration room, three cubicles for doctors, an office, a room for dispensing medicines, a computer room, a pathology laboratory, a room for visitors, a library, and a room for massage. A terrace holds a spacious lean-to for yoga instruction. “Plans are underway to build a whole new facility, designed with a healing environment in mind,” explained Easthope, “as the current facilities are really cramped.”

A person visiting Sambhavna Clinic is free to choose the system of medicine for their treatment: allopathic (Western medicine) or ayurvedic (herbal or traditional medicine). Ayurveda is a system of medicine that is based on improving the body’s ability to cure itself from diseases. Most ayurvedic medicines are herbal preparations. The clinic makes many of its own medicines from herbs gathered, purchased, and now grown nearby in a newly established garden. The clinic uses homeopathy, yoga, and other alternative therapies such as massage therapy to treat persons with exposure-induced respiratory disorders as well as other common symptoms of Union Carbide Gas Disease such as insomnia, backache, joint pains, constipation, and anxiety attacks.

Remarkably, the whole effort is funded mainly by contributions from individuals, mostly from appeals for donations in ads in newspapers in the U.S. and the UK. Money given in the spirit of solidarity and involvement, not guilt, the clinic believes, is *duwa*, or good wishes, and makes their medicines more effective. During Easthope’s tour,



*Bhopal: The so-called "containment" facility for hazardous waste at the Union Carbide factory site. "It looked like a carport," said Easthope. (Below) Bhopal: Easthope's international delegation touring the Union Carbide facility responsible for the world's worst industrial accident in 1984.*

the roof was being used to paint signs for an upcoming demonstration at Dow headquarters in Bombay.

### **The power of organizing**

"I was impressed with the resilience of the people in India," said Easthope, "in particular Bhopal, and by their energy, despite a really horrific event, to continue to figure out ways to do for themselves, to innovate and make their lives better even though they were being ignored and disrespected by the various powers in the situation."

Easthope points to another group she spent time with in Bhopal as a shining example of the power of organizing and the hope and empowerment that it brings to people. "After the gas disaster a number of short-lived economic development projects were launched to provide assistance to victims so they could continue working," said Easthope. "Most of those jobs ended. But one women's stationery factory remains open, and continues to provide good jobs for survivors. That factory was organized by the women, and their union has become a center of activism for justice for the victims of Bhopal. So we went to the stationery workers facility and met with these women, all of whom are victims of the disaster. That was one of the most emotional meetings of the trip for me."



### **World Social Forum**

Easthope and the American delegation, accompanied by many members of the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal and other international colleagues, traveled by train to join nearly 80,000 people from around the world gathered on the outskirts of Bombay for the 4th annual World Social Forum – the people's alternative to the governmental World Economic Forum.

Various members of the delegation participated in official WSF events including a forum for people from Dow-impacted communities, and a panel discussion entitled "Challenging Corporate Power in a Globalized Economy," where the Bhopal gas disaster was featured.

There were many forums, big and small, panel discussions, even smaller affinity group meetings on every topic under the sun, but Easthope said she found herself more drawn to the activities on the "street" that ran

through the center of the grounds. "There was constant drumming, dancing, and singing as well as street theater, demonstrations and parades, every hour, day and night, on every issue you can imagine," she said. There were also many stages for more organized performances that included highly produced plays, poetry readings, and craft showings. The carnival/art fair atmosphere was enhanced by vendors from all over the world selling beautiful, hand made goods that supported various small groups and cooperatives in service of a cause.

### **Seeking accountability**

As part of her official WSF agenda, Easthope participated in a demonstration at Dow Chemical's nearby Bombay headquarters. The demonstration was organized by ICJB to seek accountability for the victims of the Bhopal gas disaster and to show the solidarity of the different campaigns that are working on Dow Chemical issues around the world.

The demonstrators numbered over 300 with a large contingent of women from Tamil Nadu, a women's collective from the south of India who had a huge presence at the WSF. There was drumming, dancing, and chanting, and even a skit that was performed by the Bhopalese that featured a former U-M student and now Bhopal organizer as the Warren Anderson character (former head of Union Carbide in India, who fled the country after being charged with homicide in connection with the disaster). At one point Easthope addressed the crowd, along with others, about living in Dow-contaminated Michigan.

Eventually a small delegation of protesters met with Dow officials. They

included Michelle Hurd Riddick from mid-Michigan (home of Dow's world headquarters), Gary Cohen from the Environmental Health Fund, a member of the European Parliament from Belgium, a physician from Vietnam, and several representatives from Bhopal groups and Greenpeace.

### Think global, design global

"It's hard to go to India," said Easthope, "and not contemplate the scale of human suffering in the world because it's not behind closed doors there – it's on the streets and in your face." The 20-minute drive from Easthope's hotel to the WSF took her directly past an area known as Asia's largest slum. "It went on for as far as the eye could see, for miles and miles and miles and miles," said Easthope.

Easthope found the air quality in India indescribably bad and the prevalence of one particular genre of solid waste: plastic. "There are very few square inches of urban India that aren't filled with plastic waste," said Easthope. "There are mountains and mountains of plastic, and canals that are literally choked with plastic waste. And apparently this has happened in a very short period of time, perhaps in the last 20 years."

"The trip really challenged me and made me fundamentally rethink my priorities at work," said Easthope. "For instance, one material that I work on a lot at the Ecology Center is polyvinyl chloride plastic – PVC plastic. PVC manufacturers often talk about PVC being burned in well-controlled incinerators in the developed world. It's not entirely true here as incinerators can be quite faulty, and much burning is not controlled (there are house fires and landfill fires and backyard barrel burning), but it's even more problematic in India. When you open-burn PVC in a backyard or on the street you can create phosgene gas, which is a nerve gas, and hydrochloric acid, which is toxic to the respiratory system. And you can create



*Bombay: During the demonstration at Dow Chemical's corporate headquarters a small delegation of protesters met with Dow officials.*

dioxin – very efficiently. That becomes a real concern when waste is burned in the developing world."

She continued: "We need to really think about the fact that India, and China for example, are major growth markets where there isn't an infrastructure to handle the life cycle of our toxic consumer products. We can't just talk about product disposal in places where we have lined landfills, but we need to talk about our toxic consumer products in places where those products are not managed at all. This just confirms and heightens the priority on the need to properly design products up front – to think not only about the U.S. context but the global context in which these products will be used and disposed."

### Message in a clay pot

On one of two very long train rides in India, Easthope discovered by accident a perfect example of a package designed to serve a function well yet leave no permanent environmental footprint: a simple clay pot. As she told it: "It was a nice very small clay pot that was completely serviceable for yogurt (the most delicious I've ever had). It had been hardened in the sun, not fired in a kiln, so it remained clay. The practice of throwing used waste out the window in India in that case wasn't a problem.

Since it hadn't been fired, it just returns to clay and doesn't in any way contribute to the degradation of the environment or a toxic legacy that remains for years and years."

The clay pot used to be the standard in India, as was the plate made from sun-hardened leaves, but these days, it is of course an exception to the norm both in India and the U.S., Easthope pointed out. Yet it illustrates a point when compared to a plastic container. "We're over-designing and over-packaging – the packaging just doesn't fit the function," she explained. "So we have plastic packaging or plastic bags that we'll use for a few minutes – but when we discard it, it will last for years and years, littering and clogging the environment. Or maybe it will be burned and emit toxic gases. And when we manufactured that plastic bag, we exposed people to poisons both inside the factory, and in the community that gets exposed to the effluent. And for what? A brief moment of service. India is just the perfect canvas on which you see how utterly ridiculous our industrial society is and how we really have a mismatch between the need and the product, and it all starts with product design."

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Ted Sylvester is editor of *From the Ground Up*.