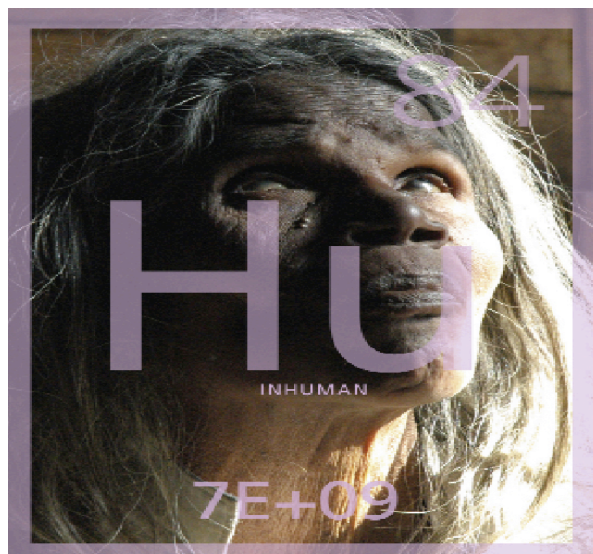


## Elementals: The Arts of Bhopal, 1984-2015

Pramod K. Nayar

*Bhopal is the world's most frightening laboratory where all experiments, with chemicals and with truth, have gone wrong.*



### DRIVING PEOPLE TO DESPAIR & SUICIDE.

Lachho Bai sits in her doorway, cradling a garment that belonged to her daughter. She's speaking, but what she's saying, no one can tell. At least half of Bhopal survivors suffer from mental health problems, but the anguish of many is worsened by the fact that their drinking water is being systematically poisoned by chemicals leaking from the abandoned factory. In July 2006, despair prompted survivors' leader Sunil Kumar to end his own life. Dow, which inherited Union Carbide's liabilities, refuses to clean up the factory or clean the poisoned water. **Where is the human element?**

[www.bhopal.net](http://www.bhopal.net)

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Figure 1

What would the arts of a disaster look like? What designs does one make of slow violence? How does one draw deferred dying? These questions sound at once like a commentator's pedantry and a public campaign. [www.bhopal.net](http://www.bhopal.net) created a poster campaign that invites these questions. The campaign was a direct spin-off on Dow Chemical's *The Human Element* campaign of 2006-09 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsCG26886w8>). Dow's slickly produced video spoke of the Human Element as unlisted on the periodic table, but which is 'elemental', and produces the real 'chemistry' (these are words used in the video). Dow set the video in a wide variety of places, from Asia to the USA, deserts to tropical forests, suggesting that in any landscape, the common element that binds is the Human Element. The Human Element is foundational to all matter on earth and is the catalyst that energizes all processes on earth.

On the occasion of the Bhopal chemogenocide, datelined 3 December 2015, let us scroll through the arts of this chemogenocide. Dow, as should be well-known, now owns Union Carbide, but has refused to clean up Bhopal.

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Admittedly, the Dow campaign is about *Global Dow*. But for us, in India, Dow represents one place: Bhopal. The Bhopal campaign is a direct take-off on Dow worldwide, and much of this campaign situates Bhopal as *one* instance in the global toxification project that is Dow's. This runs the risk of effacing Bhopal in the welter of similar cases. However, Bhopal must be treated as the most spectacular, most magnified and most long-lasting local instance of a global problem. Further, Bhopal's dubious status as the single most powerful instantiation of a toxic process demands attention even when the campaign disburses attention towards all of Dow/Union Carbide works worldwide.

The Bhopal campaign takes on each component and rhetorical turn of the Dow video in both visual and verbal text in its posters. Four aspects of the campaign stand out: the emphasis on chemistry, universalism/universality, biological citizenship and the politics of knowledge.

The Dow advertisement speaks of the *chemistry* of being. It tells us how sodium and chlorine or hydrogen and oxygen combine. But the really powerful chemistry occurs, it declares, when we add the Human Element (designated 7e+09, as in a periodic table, with mock atomic number and atomic mass) to the mix. Dow represents chemistry as the process of life-formation, progress, triumph and the very human spirit – in short, everything from nature to civilization. The Bhopal campaigners take this idea of 'chemistry' and invert its role in the evolution of life and civilization in order to signify something else altogether.

'Chemistry' codes only as toxin in the Bhopal reworking of the term. The toxin catalysed deformity, illness, death and widespread destruction. 'Chemistry' here is the irreversible runaway reactions produced in human bodies, plant-animal life and the landscape due to the intrusion of elements that were never meant to be synthesized in the first instance. One Bhopal campaign poster (Figure 2) foregrounding this sense of 'chemistry' speaks of Dow's 'poisoned tentacles':

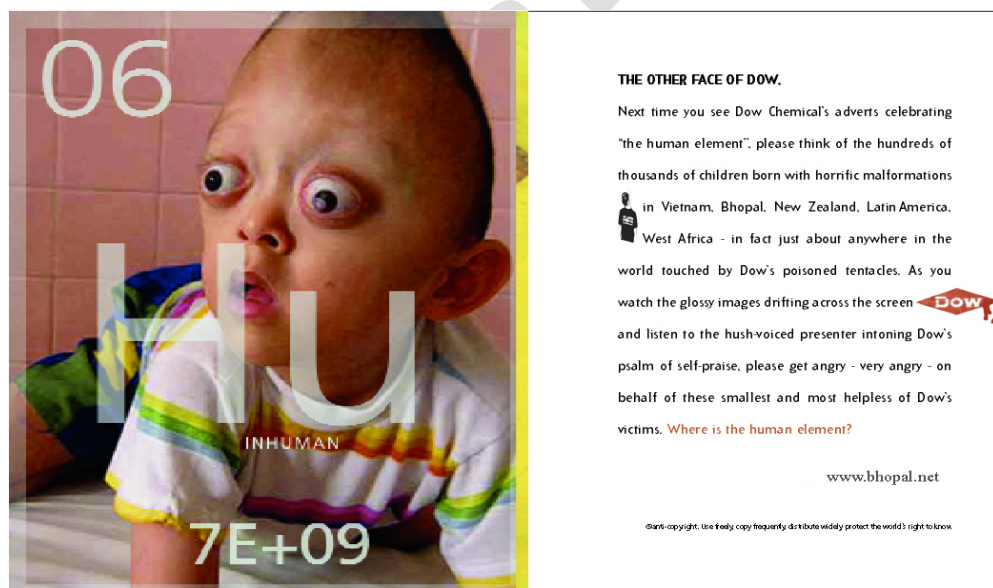


Figure 2

The poster captures the *loss* of the human element, of what is considered the bare elements of the human, as a result of the arrival of the synthetic chemical. It also alerts us to the incommensurable nature of the claims made by Dow – of the chemicals it makes and the human element it supposedly promotes. The ‘other face of Dow’ is the one the child in the poster possesses, a face determined not by the chemistry of parental DNA or nutrition but by the chemistry of a Dow reagent. Dow’s chemistry contains chemical elements not found on the periodic table, but it also ensures that the victims of this chemistry will not be placed on the human species table.

Chemistry is the skewing of life processes toward slow decay and early death as the bodies corrode from within. The Bhopal campaign treats chemistry as the destruction of the human spirit as their bodies collapse. There is no triumphant reaction, only the catalysis of collapse. Unlike the smiling, athletic and appealing bodies – supposedly the human element – of Dow’s advert, the Bhopal campaign has deformed and vulnerable bodies (Figures 2-3).

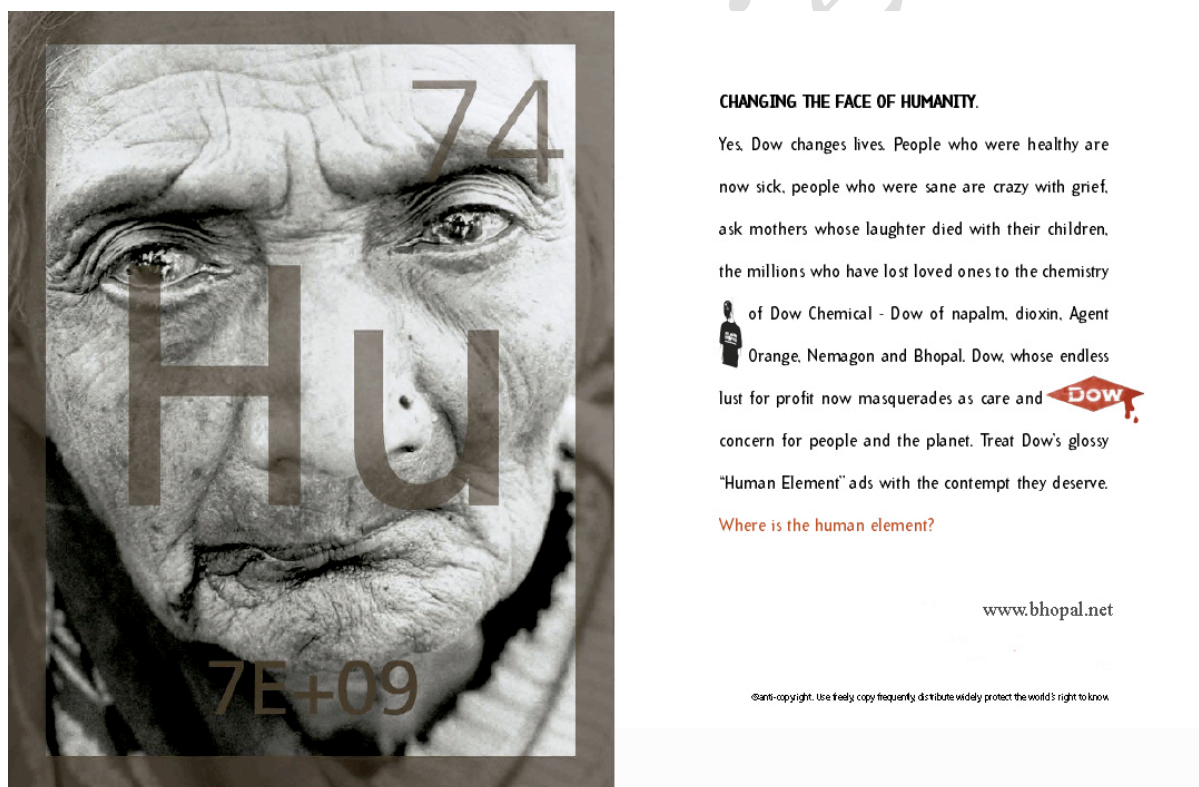


Figure 3

Dow brings together multiple landscapes, races and cultures into the ambit of its feel-good video. Common to the world, every corner and every topographical features, suggests the infomercial, is the Human Element. Dow emphasizes the *universality* of the human spirit and the human element itself.



Bhopal could not agree more, but with a shift of emphasis: Dow is a universal killer. In the above image it lists Agent Orange (Vietnam), Nemagon (Nicaragua) and Bhopal. The universal in the campaign is the exposure to biomedical disorders of millions of people world-wide in what is a truly horrific version of globalization. The Bhopal campaign does not speak of universalism except as universal suffering and universal vulnerability. As the poster below proclaims: ‘every single person on Earth carries some of Dow’s poison in their body’ (Figure 4).

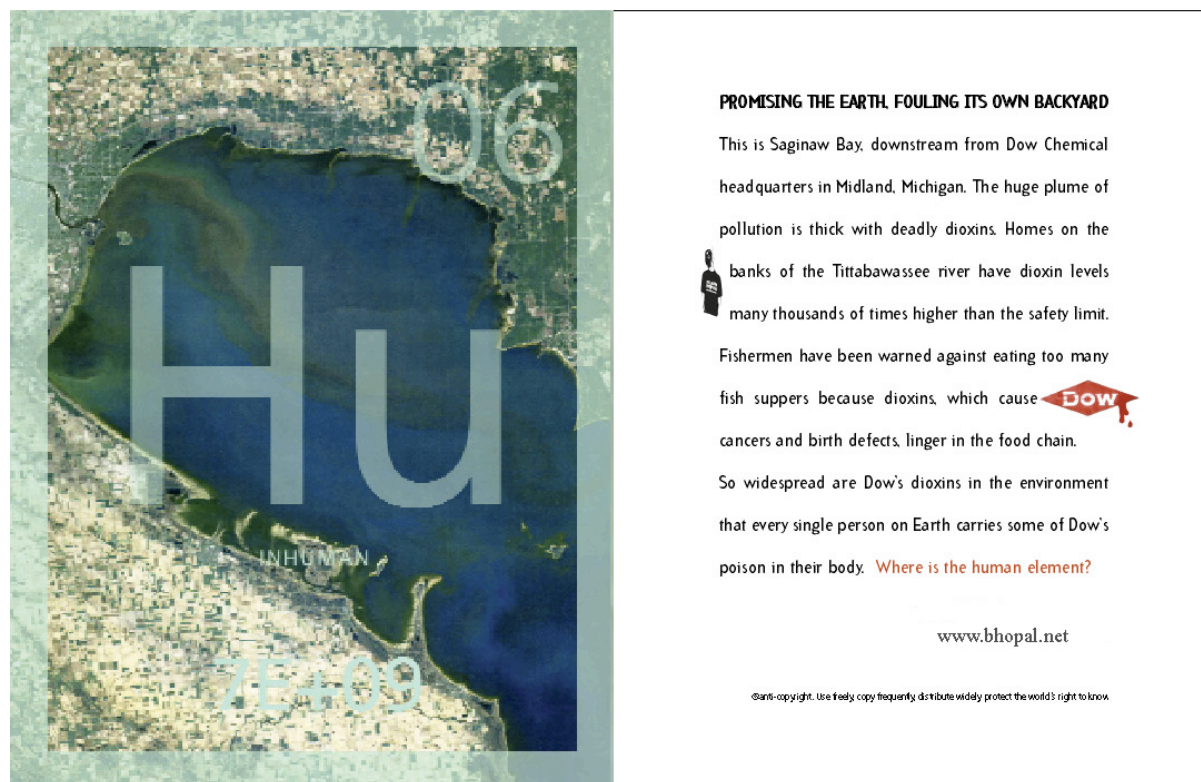


Figure 4

If the Human Element in Dow's infomercial is universal, then toxins produced by the company are also universal. Indeed we are all Dow-humans in the poster campaign because we are united through a shared toxicology report. From Michigan to Saigon, we are well en-Dowed humans. Dow's global reach has little to do with either its safety or progress (some would recall the savage irony of the sign board in the Carbide factory, Bhopal: 'safety is everybody's business' – which every documentary focuses on). Every place on earth, in other words, is a Bhopal. Or, Bhopal is everyplace that Dow is.

The singularity of a disaster such as Bhopal 1984 is embedded in a universality of imminent catastrophe. Every disaster might be singular in its specific detail, but the processes that culminated in the disaster are not singular in themselves. The greed, neglect of safety features, carelessness, culpability and deliberate production of potentially lethal toxins is common to any of the cities and provinces with a Dow or Carbide installation. 'Patterns of negligence' as an

investigator of the Bhopal chemogenocide put it in the *National Geographic* documentary, *The Bhopal Disaster*, are the same everywhere. Vulnerability is manufactured through the industry's actions, and covers the world.

Dow promised safe drinking water to everyone on earth in 2013. The promise of a good deed is however belied by its actions, which are determined not by considerations of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR, that odd term which seeks to mitigate rampant profiteering through an occasional and minimal social agenda) but greed. The Bhopal campaign zeroes in on this contradiction of the *rhetoric* of safe water and the *action* of poisoning (Figure 5).

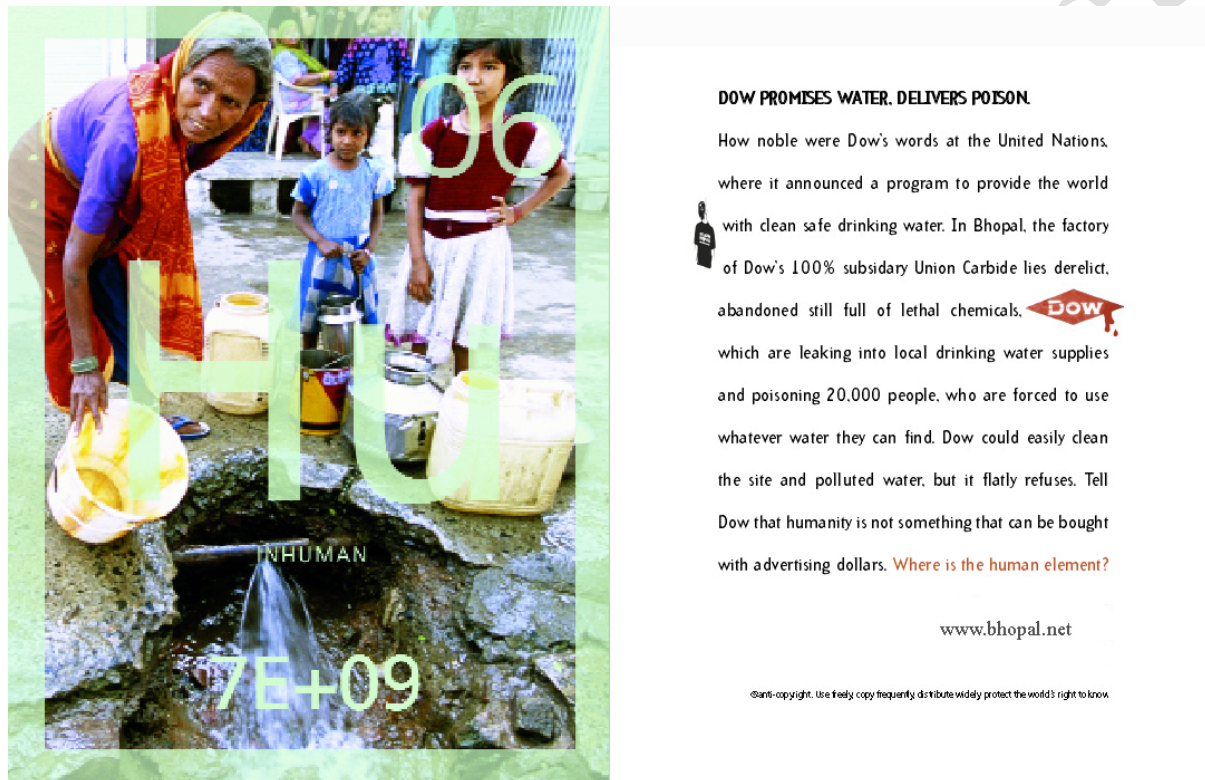


Figure 5

It is not, however, a simply binary of the word and deed being in contradiction. I have elsewhere noted the emergence of a biological citizenship in the case of disaster victims (2014). I propose that campaigns such as the above, with their emphasis on bodily deformity, ailments and distress invoke this category of biological citizenship in an implicit verso/recto arrangement with the CSR that Dow promotes about itself. If Dow's CSR and its emphasis on care, safety and social justice is the highly visible verso, the Bhopal campaign reveals its recto: it is precisely care, justice and social concerns that Dow destroys. In order to show this 'recto-face' of Dow, the campaign highlights corporeal trauma.

Dow's emphasis on *material* elements (chemicals as fertiliser or pesticide), food products and water for the world is matched by the campaign's emphasis on *material* pollutants and *material*-corporeal injuries. Writing about the Bhopal activists' petitioning the Prime Minister, signing the papers with their blood, Dwaipayan Banerjee has argued that we see here a 'substance activism' and a 'political haematology' (2013). Yet political haematology seems inadequate to describe the campaign, which focuses on corporeal deformity that runs right down to the bone and the molecule (genetic mutations induced by MIC remnants) – material matter that cannot even be seen except through sophisticated instrumentation. Thus, while signature campaigns in blood offer up a visible political materiality, the Bhopal campaign forces us to acknowledge that the damage has gone beyond what is visible matter. Poisoned blood is a dramatic signifier but the campaign asks us to pay attention to invisible mutations done to invisible matter like DNA. By representing the material signs of hidden alterations to bone, tissue or molecular structure these campaigns generate *material biographies* of victims.

Yet there is something else too, if we position these biographies next to the documentaries and the oral narratives (the last studied in detail by Suroopa Mukherjee, 2010). In the interviews in documentaries like *One Night in Bhopal*, *The Bhopal Disaster* and *20 Years without Justice* we see and hear the victims speak of assorted bodily ailments they and their families inherited. A new form of *autobiography* may also be found in these narratives, all founded on conditions of biomedical disorders. It is an 'autobiology' (the term is from Anna Harris et al, writing about individuals publicising their genetic data, 2014) because all information – about the city, about that night, about the family, about inheritance, and about UCCL – finally coheres around one's *own* biological suffering and condition. More than any populace in the country, perhaps the Bhopalis have been rendered most autobiographical: constantly made aware of their bodily ailments and their biological inheritances.

Dow speaks of the 'dazzling' discovery of 'knowledge' in its film. This is cruel irony, since, as the poster campaign tells us, and as accounts from 2-3 December 1984 show, UCCL refused to divulge the exact composition of the gas leaking from the plant despite frantic phone calls from Hamidia Hospital. They refused, later, to reveal any possible antidote. And of course they never came clean on the short-term or long-term after-effects of the toxin. For a company that lives a culture of secrecy (Figure 6 below) to speak of any kind of knowledge, especially in the face of such tangible evidence of an intentional concealment of information is surely monstrous.

The campaign's amazing emphases, of which I have merely examined four, foregrounds what Bhopal represents: not a culture of Death, but a culture of Dying. The 'inhuman' in the posters represents not a category or species, but a process. Bhopal is a code-word for all the possible inhumanization that may be inflicted upon a people. The inhuman is not the 'other' of the human but a subset of the humans who have been forced to lose their humanness. The human, says a





#### KILL FOR PROFIT. CALL IT PATRIOTISM.

Vietnam vets exposed to Dow's dioxin-laced Agent Orange suffer from skin diseases, liver damage and cancers to

soft tissue organs such as the lungs and stomach.

Many of their children were miscarried, stillborn or emerged into life with horrific birth defects.



An internal Dow memo of February 22, 1965 records that "dioxin is exceptionally toxic", but the knowledge was kept secret. As a result millions of Americans and Vietnamese were exposed to, and are still dying from "the most toxic molecule ever synthesized by man."

Where is the human element?

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Figure 6

contemporary philosopher (Giorgio Agamben), is a machine, an apparatus, for expelling the animal. If that is the case then the inhuman is the carbidized apparatus for bringing back this expelled animal. Bhopal is the world's most frightening laboratory where all experiments, with chemicals and with truth, have gone wrong.

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