

Religious agencies, sweet shops and lower class group vendors as 'role model' in awareness building with respect to growing urbanization

Padmini Rangarajan

Dept. of Sociology, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad
sphoorthitheatre@yahoo.co.in, sphoorthitheatre@gmail.com

Abstract

Since 1970s, the Chipko movement, deforestation, peaceful methods of protest and slogan "ecology is permanent economy" has made a remarkable impact on about environment in rural and urban settings in India. With many intellectuals, organizations, government policy and conferences working towards sustainability and organic farming has definitely making progress but in slow pace. Based on research articles one burning environmental issues that poses an unprecedented challenge to developing nations like India and others. India opened up world trade a decade ago that is just hitting its stride growing the economy fast enough to lift millions of people out of poverty. However, growth based on carbon-intensive fuels like coal and oil is already clogging urban air and undermining improvements in health and welfare. In addition, increase in carbon emissions adds up to rising global warming and possibility of making things much worse. On the other hand, China has just opened for world trade with a caution to save health and environment. In this background, I would like submit the observational study on 'non-use of Plastic Polythene bags by 'Religious agencies, Sweet Shops and lower class group vendors as 'Role model' in awareness building with respect to growing urbanization'. India being a vast country with varied community people living and practicing respective cultural and traditional rituals—Plastic bags comes handy to suit in all walks of life. As it has become a habitual practice to be depended on plastic polythene bags and without which the life does not exist. Policy formulated on 'Ban on use of plastic bags' is imposed. Nevertheless, in reality rights from street vendors to a well to do executives have become dependent on this product 'plastic'. Much awareness on plastic and plastic related products is being made, yet the uses of plastic bags are increasing day by day. The plastic bags that comes handy to carry many things right from solid, semi solids and liquids. The major problem arises when it is disposed in garbage, littered on roadsides, lakes, nallas and in open areas. This is one among the major bothering environmental problems of urban cities in India. Just a 'ban on use' does not help unless ban is imposed on ones practice or habit. Dependency on plastic bags is more or less like addicted to the use of plastic bags. In the process, the environment is getting damage leading various problems like water pollution, overflow of garbage, littering on roadside, nallas logging and in turn, giving rise to various mosquito and other insects breeding affecting the health of one and all, particularly the children. Working with the poorer sections of people has helped to realize that lack of awareness is creating deficiencies in social actions, leading to deterioration of the Environment. During my previous work and present research work I have come to this understanding that, no doubt awareness campaigns and workshops on ecological concerns helps in sensitizing people about the issue and pursues a handful to proceed further to tackle with same or to take up preventive measures. In practice and reality, the main objective to bring a wholesome change or practice is affected. It again remains concentrated only among upper class or elite group. On the other hand, common mass belonging to low-income groups, lower strata those who residing in slum settlements are the real victims, who remain as an ignorant and innocent common mass. The awareness is needed here to strengthen them to give up the practicing habitual practice and adopt to live without it for better environment and better living. This paper focuses on environmental management through reformation in practice and attitude. The paper focuses on the observation made on some of the religious agencies of a popular sweet shop and vendor community of Hyderabad city as role model in helping in conservation of urban environment.

Keywords: Chipko movement, deforestation, burning environmental issues, vendor community, urban environment.

Introduction

India, a diverse country with rich tradition and contradictions has unsolved complex tangles. It is world's largest democracy, yet weak at implementation of laws and feeble when it comes to sustainability. A new world bank report strengthening institutions for sustainable growth: country environmental analysis for India underlines the need for 'environmental sustainability' as the next great challenge that India faces along its path to development. Attempts towards generating environmental awareness, work towards sustainability is done differently at different levels. Pollution from plastic litter is a serious problem

throughout India-someplace where for generations any disposable containers were biodegradable and tossed aside after use, a habit which doesn't work well with plastic. The state ban is an attempt, duplicated in a number of locations across the nation, to stem this tide of plastic pollution. India consumes around five million tonnes of plastic products every year. Of this, a large amount of consumption happens through use of plastic bags alone. The country doesn't have a national ban on use of plastic bags. However, on their own, several states such as Punjab, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala, Maharashtra, Sikkim and West Bengal have imposed a ban on plastic bags. Rajasthan, the

largest state of India joined this green league in July. The ban makes it illegal to manufacture, import, sale and transport of plastic carry-bags will be illegal all across Rajasthan. No shopkeeper, retailer, trader, hawker or vendor is allowed to supply goods to consumers in bags.

In 2005, when Maharashtra government banned manufacture, sale and use of all plastic bags, saying they choked drainage systems during recent monsoon rains. Though Environmental groups welcomed the ban, Plastic manufacturers said 100,000 people would lose their jobs. In spite of levying penalties on manufacturers and stores selling plastic bags fine up to Rs 5,000, while individuals using bags face penalties of Rs 1,000, by then Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, failed in implementation and remained as a mere talk with little or no action. Other Indian states have already banned the use of thin plastic bags-- 20 microns or .002 centimeters thick-- used by shoppers. But how for the ban has been effective in our country is a matter for further exploration. Similarly, in June 2009, the government made it clear that it is not in favour of a blanket ban on using plastic bags while it is working on use of biodegradable plastic as colouring elements like dyes is a health hazard and thin bags and material can severely jam up sewage systems. Minister of state for environment and forests Jairam Ramesh told Lok Sabha that while reducing plastics was necessary, the material had been promoted initially to save paper and trees. The further argument was that if municipalities made a better effort to manage their solid waste, the plastic problem would reduce considerably. The government, he said, was working on use of biodegradable plastic as reverting to paper bags could be even more hazardous to the environment. People had switched to use of plastic rather than paper the world over some 20 years ago to slow down deforestation. Polythene and plastics used for ferrying food and consumable goods like milk and to develop saplings of hybrid and nursery plants will be excluded. With regard to Andhra Pradesh State, on August 11, 2010 decision to discourage use of plastic bags in the State, government has totally banned their use in the hill shrine of Tirumala, and stated that the ban will come into force within a month i.e., from September 2010. Even the 'laddu' and other prasadam shall be packed in plastic covers will be supplied in cloth, paper or jute bags. Again, the good news is that the richest Hindu temple is not only going to ban plastic carry bags but plastic in total. On the other side, one could easily see at Tirumala posters and slogans scribbled on walls a about ban imposed on plastic bags. At the same time pile of plastic bags are available near *Ladoo prasadam* counters. Thus, encouraging and compelling the devotees to buy plastic bags. Nevertheless, this move is decidedly positive and a welcome step towards transitioning towards more sensible use of plastic.

Plastic bags reach commoners than elite families:

Of course, in big shopping malls the products are packed in an attractive hand made paper bags with wonderful block prints and designs. They also give an elegant and sophisticated look. But the fact is, these bags are pretty expensive and beyond common mans purchasing power. Again, these bags have their own disadvantages too. A small size hand made paper bags cost not less than Rs20/- and increases with the price

increases with the increase size of the bag. Can common masses afford for this? It is the unsolved question one need to think and explore the alternative as replacement for plastic carry bags that common masses can also afford. Plastics bags that enter common household easily by men and women who start their right from the morning with buying of milk packets, eggs, bread, and other necessary groceries. Then, this followed by the vegetable vendors who dump as with some more carry bags, then the flower sellers, and goes on and on. At the end of the day one could easily find pile of plastic bags in every nook and corner of the houses. As commoners we all are totally unaware of the harms of the products. While the ban is a timely step, it can be incomplete and unsuccessful without proper community participation. Every commoner has to be made aware of the harm caused by these plastic bags. For this community participation must happen, the community members need to be made aware of the details of the ban - why was it imposed, what are the affects of plastic bags, how the ban would curb those affects and what would happen if the ban is not followed etc. Unless that is done, people will continue to use the bags and the ban will stay just as another government decree.

Now the question that arises before is:

- What is the alternative for plastic polythene bags?
- Are hand made paper bags and paper bags the only alternative?
- Are they any other alternative?
- Can we total stop using plastic carry bags?
- How can we reduce and curtail our dependency?

A commoner is an aid to a commoner

As, a help extended by a commoner to a commoner is more acceptable than others. It is again, if the aid is extended by one among the commoner with whom we all interact and come in contact is appreciably accepted. It could be a temple priest, vegetable vendor or a sweet shop merchant. Well, in search of some solution, the study is highlighting the roles played by Sweet Shop, Religious agencies, and low class vendor groups in Hyderabad as a case study.

Religious agency: Chilkur balaji temple.

Chilkur Balaji temple, quite popularly known as 'Visa Balaji' where, devotees offer prayers to get through American Visa proceedings. This temple is located at a distance of 33 km from Mehdipttam, Hyderabad, more famous among the residents of Hyderabad (if not among the larger Indian community) as the "Visa temple" because it is believed to aid those who have applied for US Visa. This temple attracts around 6,000 to 8,000 devotess on normal days and more than 20,000 to 25,000 devotees on week-ends. Known earlier for doing away with "Hundi" (a box where devotees contribute to the temple) and "VIP Darshan" (a special queue line for VIPs that gets them directly to the sanctum sanctorum), this is the first time the temple has made its venture into *environmental preservation* by saying 'No to Plastic' from July 2009. This pilot proposal taken up by the temple is to allow only handloom bags for the main reasons being one to conserve the environment and to support weavers' communities of Medak and Karimnagar districts where weavers' suicidal death news alerted the government. Now, the annual consumption of handloom cloth is

around two lakh metres. It is our usual practice to carry pooja thali to temples. Now most of the temple is surrounded by vendors who sell all the pooja materials in cane baskets or insist on to carry cloth bags. This change has not come over night but has definitely made an impact. Now, this noble practice has attracted other major temples too. The fabrics for handloom bags are sourced from APCO, the Andhra Pradesh handloom weavers' co-operative society and Sircilla Handloom Weavers Society. The fabrics that sources are stitched into bags with the help of "Mahila Pranganam". The scheme got all the encouragement from the State government and APCO which supplied the handloom scrap at 80 per cent subsidy for making the bags.

Emerald sweet shop, Domalguda, Hyderabad:

'Live healthy and let live healthy is the concept'

Emerald Mithai shop is unique of its kind in Hyderabad. Resting under the shade of huge tree opposite to Sri RamaKrishna Math, this Shop is famous for Ghee sweets, Indian traditional sweets. Unlike usual businessman, the owners of Emerald Sweet (who are brothers) selling sweets is just not a business but to create awareness about our environment and work for preservation. The specialty of the shop is that the owner never uses polythene carry bags from the bagging of business. It dispenses items only in paper bags / cloth bags. All Sweets and Savor items are free from chemical colors and preservatives. Usage of colors is minimized. Colours, if any present, are of herbal origin and Silver foil (Varak) is never used. There is a collection of paper bags, files; folders etc all made with recycled material available free. On the walls one can see pictures of kids involved in eco-projects. The owner also under takes rain water harvesting and trees re-translocation projects. They also educate people about the depleting water levels and the urgent need to incorporate rain water harvesting throughout the twin cities. Good news is that all eco lovers can avail of 4% discount if customer carries his or her own jute or cloth bag. A free sapling is also given away for special occasions like birthday, wedding anniversary etc. And if any one returns plastic covers with Emerald labels they get further discount. Thanks to the awareness on hazardous environmental pollution taking place due to plaster of paris idols many people now want CLAY IDOLS. Some people in the society are taking such initiative also. It is interesting to find a mithaiwala doing it. For the last six years, customers are getting eco-friendly clay Ganesha Idol free for Ganesh Chaturthi. The owners even train in making cloy Ganesha idol to school children and aspirants. Mr. Vijayram, the owner of Emerald Mithai Shop who is an artist and also the person behind SAVE-Society for Awareness and Vision on Environment. 25,000 free clay idols were distributed this year against 10,000 idols last year. Also this year Mr. Vijayram has taken another initiative of providing Clay idols of 5 feet for Sarvajanic Ganeshotsav in a subsidised rate. The 5 feet idol costs Rs. 3500, but has been subsidised by the Government and is given at Rs 1,000 only. A unique 'sweet' shop with a 'strong' message. The shop makes every customer pause and look at the efforts put by the team to save our planet earth while buying sweets. The initiative taken by such agencies has not only creating awareness among common masses but also has

streamlined the business attitude among small vegetables and fruit vendors who insist on paper or cloth bags.

Conclusion

A unique 'sweet' shop with a 'strong' message. The shop makes every customer pause and look at the efforts put by the team to save our planet earth while buying sweets. The initiative taken by such agencies has not only creating awareness among common masses but also has streamlined the business attitude among small vegetables and fruit vendors who insist on paper or cloth bags. Small drops of water fill the mighty ocean is just not a saying by itself; in reality it is the small efforts that put forth by each one of us that counts to bring in attitudinal change to conservation and preservation of environment. India being a country with no scarcity of spirituality, environmental awareness spread by a religious institution will probably prove to be very effective. Temples and other religious agencies are the places visited by and large by all including commoners. Here the usage and dumping of plastic carry bags are more in number. At the same time such agencies can also act in controlling and preserving the environment, for the reason that even the common man would abide and follow the rules.

So, more and more such religious agencies should take up the issue and work towards the conservation. Again as another saying goes 'Habits die hard'. To quit, cultivating a habit of saying NO-NO to plastic would take time and definitely not very long time. The dependency on plastic would lessen if another alternative that is safe and at the same time provides employability for long.

Sustainability is to be looked more form social behaviour and attitudinal point of view. Every aspect of environmental awareness has direct or indirect interlinking with social life. So the change has to come within and from the society as collective to curb the impact of the problem. However, in a country like India the cut down use of plastic bags would definitely happen but on slow and steady pace. It is a good scope to involve youth association and mahila mandals wherein, training can imparted in making newspaper bags, recycled paper bags, cloth and jute bags. As a source of self employment would fetch good returns and help in conservation. In addition, traditional occupations like basket makers, pot-makers can be involved in conservation.

References

1. Chilkur Balaji Temple VAK magazines.
2. Emerald Sweet Shop, Domalguda, Hyderabad.
3. 'Plastic bags banned in Tirumala' The Hindu August11, 2010.
4. 'Plastic bags:No ban, only penalty' The Times of India January 6, 2010.
5. 'Is ban on Plastic a must' articles from various Telugu and English newspapers and periodicals 2008-2010.
6. 'Indian State outlaws Plastic bags'- www.news.bbc.co.uk (dated August 7, 2003).
7. 'Is a ban on plastic bags justified?' www.plastemart.com.
8. www.wikipedia.com
9. www.news.nationalgeographic.com