

Social Responsibilities of Business in India, in the Sixties

(An interaction with a Senior Marketing Executive of yester years)

Special Correspondent

It was a Friday morning. Mr.T.S.Nagarajan, former Managing Director, Brooke Bond India Ltd. was in his usual cheerful mood. This correspondent was at his Indiranagar residence in Bangalore, to pick up some gems from his vast real time experience both at field level covering almost entire India and at the top Corporate Management level.

After few moments of pleasantries the purpose of this correspondent's visit was opened up. "Sir, our July-September 2016 issue's focus is on Good Governance and Corporate Social Responsibilities. Joining as a Marketing Executive you have extensively covered the marketing management of one of the handful multinational companies in India of those days, by the time you retired as Managing Director. We wish to cover your views."

Mr.Nagarajan contemplated for few minutes. He was a bit reluctant to use the "big word" (as he put it) 'Corporate' and picked up a serious real time story of national importance on Social Responsibilities of Business' punched with nostalgic humour of the British Management era. This has happened in the Sixties. Here we go with his articulation on the subject.

"In the mid sixties seven companies joined in a common marketing programme to distribute the condom on behalf of the Government of India – Brooke Bond, Imperial Tobacco (now ITC), Lipton, Union Carbide, Hindustan Lever, WIMCO and Tat Oil Mills. It was, I think, one of the finest examples of social or societal marketing and co-operation between the Private Sector and the government for a cause. We had a strong brief from our then Overseas Chairman John Brooke who wrote and said "For India this is a must. I would like Brooke Bond India to give it all support."

With the epidemics of cholera, chickenpox, malaria, etc., slowly vanishing thanks to the (though still rudimentary) health care activities of the government, the gap between deaths and births has widened and 10-12 million human beings arrived on the scene every year.

The Government was no doubt aware of the problem and was doing its best. But it is deeply interwoven into India's religious doctrines. Language and religion are still the two most potent forces operating in the society.

With a view to solving the population problems several leading marketing companies

in India took up the distribution of the condom Nirodh. Demographers reckoned that for the use of every five hundred condoms, one birth could be prevented. If we distributed five hundred million condoms we could prevent one million births, that is to say, a single effective programme can tackle ten percent of the problem.

The Nirodh programme brought the whole subject of family planning out in the open. The field sales force of the participating companies, who regularly visited the rural areas took the message at grass root level in their sales talk with shop keepers. From the shop keepers the message went to the village folks. Indian ladies spoke freely about Nirodh, laparoscopy, the loop and terminal methods. This often embarrassed foreigners who used to accompany the sales team at times, as the subject was taboo in western mixed society.

We as a company used to take our responsibility for the Nirodh distribution seriously. We motivated our salesmen to involve themselves completely.

The Health Ministry used to convene periodically meetings at which the programme progress would be reviewed. The meetings were usually held in one of the companies' corporate offices and there was always a lot of jokes about Nirodh traded. Most of them were of course, unprintable, but a few are worth repeating.

“What happens to an Egyptian lady who doesn't use Nirodh?”

“She becomes a mummy!”

A woman complains to an attendant at a drug store that her husband always used to buy Nirodh, but now that he is away in Tanzania for a few months “I am forced to buy it myself.”

The feedback on Nirodh from some of the areas also could be amusing.

“Sales from Punjab are very brisk.” A letter from a user says

“Sirs, I have been very satisfied with the results of Nirodh but please tell me when I should take it off.”

Our overseas Director at that time became so much of a convert to family planning that he became a one-man mission propagating the gospel of family planning wherever he went in India.

On one occasion at a major managers' conference he came out with a stentorian address on family planning. It was a grave sermon. He spoke of the ideal family, i.e. a boy and a girl. An ideal family was a happy family and an ideal family meant a better standard of living. He also stressed on Executive Health.

Later at lunch we found the managers giving the rich food at the buffet a miss and crowding around the salad table. The Director was pleased to see that the managers had taken his advice on eating to heart. He missed the longing looks that were cast in the direction of the tandoori rotis, butter masala, fried fish and desert. He got into a conversation with Krishnamouli and launched head on into his favourite topic. “By the way Krishnamouli,” he said “What is the size of your family?”

Known for his tact and diplomacy, Krishnamouli felt caged. He shifted, fidgeted before he said evasively, “Oh I have an ideal family sir.”

“Marvelous”, said the overseas Director, “a boy and a girl?”

“No Sir, four times more ideal. I have four boys and four girls.”

