

Social Responsibility of Business

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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 Tata 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.”

The only problem India faces, in my opinion, is our rapidly rising population. I believe we have the technology and management capability to solve all our other problems if we can keep the numbers down. Whatever be the size of the cake we produce by way of economic activity, the numbers it has to be shared with keep increasing.

Public Health measures have brought about a dramatic fall in the death rate and life expectancy has gone up.

Infant mortality is down, malaria brought under control, small pox has been eradicated and cholera is no long endemic. The gap between the deaths and births has widened and 10-12 million human beings arrive on the scene every year.

The Government is no doubt aware of the problem and is 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 country.

With a view to solving the population problem 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. Indian ladies spoke freely about Nirodh, laparoscopy, the loop and terminal methods. This often embarrassed foreigners as the subject was taboo in western mixed economy.

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 ones about Nirodh traded. Most of them were of course,

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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 touched on executive health and eating habits.

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 had got into a conversation with Krishnamouli and launched headlong 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.”

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

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

