

Garbage seems to be in nowadays. From the cute little boy admonishing his mother for throwing the garbage on the road in the radio commercial to Swachh Bharat, garbage is everywhere- literally! Never mind that there has been little change in the litter around us or that we, as a people, who otherwise are obsessed with Bollywood, don't seem to have taken heed of celebrity brand ambassadors goading us.

Garbage, rubbish, refuse, trash, litter, junk, scrap- call it by any name, the fact is that garbage has always been with us. From the bones of the hunted animals left in the cave shelter by a group of hunter gatherers to the plastic Mother Dairy milk packets that one finds everywhere, the quality and quantity of garbage generated by humans might have evolved but garbage is a constant.

The nature of the garbage that any culture or civilization produces tells us a lot about the civilization- not just about its economic conditions but also about cultural and social mores. This is especially true of recent times when the amount of trash that we generate has increased almost exponentially. In 1973, a group of archaeologists at the University of Arizona started a series of diggings through urban landfills and tried to study the contents. Their results, published two decades later in a book aptly titled "Rubbish! The archaeology of garbage" threw a unique light on our present day life style and civilization.

The study also busted several myths about urban living in the United States. Thus, one would assume in a society which values consumption as a supreme virtue, the vast majority of the landfill would comprise of packaging material like Styrofoam, plastic or even aluminum cans. That turns out to be not the case. In fact, the landfills were mostly paper, construction waste and garden waste.

This would seem surprising since we normally associate paper and garden waste as biodegradable. That is strictly true but what happens in a typical landfill is that the bio-waste takes a long time to degrade. Simply put, urban landfills are not compost pits.

A similar study of our trash over the last several years will indicate things about the changing urban lifestyles. This though is not an easy task because the nature of our society, till relatively recently and to an extent even now, is vastly different from that of the West. Frugality, reusing, recycling were in a sense hardwired in us- anyone who has an elder sibling of the same sex knows this well. The psychological trauma of getting only hand me down clothes was all too real. Old clothes and linen, when totally worn out and unusable, were exchanged for buckets and utensils from the enterprising travelling saleswomen from Gujrat who could be seen with a bundle of old clothes on their shoulders and a variety of buckets and utensils hanging from their hands. The only thing that was ever thrown out of the house was vegetable and fruit peels and later, Mother Dairy milk packets, since earlier, for the most part, milk was bought either in bottles or directly from the *gnala*. Everything else was reused- newspapers and old exercise books were sold to the *kabaadi*, as were the extra tin cans and glass bottles. Bottles of Scotch whisky were the prized ones since the bootlegging industry in the days of self-reliant socialism was substantial. Plastic or tetra pack packaging was unknown.

And then there were the rag pickers. This army of young children would do their rounds of the streets and garbage dumps to salvage anything of value in the garbage- a bottle mistakenly thrown away, some piece of metal or the odd plastic. At the end of this scavenging adventure, the only things left in the garbage were vegetable waste and used sanitary napkins. These would then be left to the stray dogs, cattle and the occasional pig to foray into. Thus it was common place to find shredded sanitary napkins around garbage dumps- signs of an unsuccessful hunt for food by the animals.

All this has changed now. The opening up of the economy, the acceleration of economic growth rates leading to a consumption boom especially among the urban middle classes and the packaging revolution meant that the quality and quantity of our trash changed dramatically. Milk is now almost

exclusively bought in plastic pouches, plastic bags have replaced paper bags for retail shopping, potato wafers and other goodies are sold in multilayered PET packets and plastic bottles and jars became ubiquitous. Almost everywhere one goes, one could see the discarded potato wafers packets and *gutka* sachets. If there was anything that might identify our civilization to a future archaeologist, it might well be the Shikhar Gutkha sachet !

The household garbage, which incidentally is now collected in a plastic bag, tied at the top and dumped either on the roadside or rarely in a garbage dump, has changed substantially too. The rag pickers now have variety- they can pick out plastic bottles, plastic bags, packaging material, empty Tetra Pack cartons, aluminum cans etc. to be recycled. What is left is vegetable matter, sanitary napkins and a novel object- used disposable diapers. This last object has of course made a late entry into our urban milieu but seems to have taken over the trade. The practice of using cloth diapers seems to have gone the way of landline phones in the urban areas. While previously, it was only the sanitary napkins that one would find after the stray dogs had ravished a garbage bag, it is now fairly common to see shredded diapers strewn along roads. Their large size and numbers make them a winner in this!

Disposable diapers are of course big business worldwide. In the eighties, the US alone used an estimated 16 billion of them every year. The estimate today is about 28 billion- that is about 900 diapers per second. And if you thought that the Americans are hygiene conscious, the Japanese are the world leaders- the average Japanese mother uses two and a half times as many diapers per day as the American one. Maybe the American kids are more efficient in processing food than the Japanese ones! If you don't believe me, then please visit <http://disposablediaper.net> for such nuggets of information.

Swach Bharat is of course a welcome initiative. But celebrities and politicians with brooms will make little difference in the absence of a whole logistic chain of waste disposal. The rag pickers, the result of a lopsided developmental model do act as our saviours by collecting most of our refuse. However, whatever is left still needs to be disposed of hygienically for which incinerators and waste disposal plants are required apart from a whole system of collecting and transporting waste. Till then, I guess we will have to live with soiled, shredded diapers around us. We are, after all, not just what we eat, but also what we ingest!