

STORY OF STUFF

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There is a retail boom today. Malls with big facades are mushrooming in towns big and small across the country. Many electronic gizmos, readymade garments (not necessarily basic food) are available cheap in discount sales. Glitzy ads on TV and newspapers prod us to buy more and consume more. Consumerism is at its peak. We are buying more, spending more and throwing more. But is this consumerist culture sustainable in the long run?

You can find many of the answers to these questions in the film “Story of Stuff”. This story will touch you deeply. It has been produced by Andrei Leonard who traveled round the world for over a decade researching for this film.

On many railway stations in India you’ll find no taps for drinking water, but you will find “Frooti”. The empty carton of the “Frooti” drink is manufactured by the Tetrapak Company. This carton contains several layers of aluminum, plastic and card sheet all fused into one. This makes it a wonder material –light weight, contamination free, easy to transport etc. But where do all the ingredients to manufacture this carton come from? Perhaps the plastic came from Saudi Arabia, aluminum from a mine in Orissa, and the card sheet after ripping trees from the Amazon forest. People drink the cold drink and chuck away the tetrapak without a second thought. The empty “Frooti” carton probably costs more than the drink itself! This is modernization – low-calorie drink in a high-calorie packet. These tetrapak cartons are terrible from the point of view of the environment. Because of the plastic and aluminum they do not rot. So they will lie buried in some landfill for the next few hundred years. Nature is totally helpless against this manmade monstrosity.

Of course the rich countries of the world consume a lot more stuff than we do in the Third World. An average American family uses fifty times more stuff as compared to an average Indian family. At this stupendous rate of consumption their supply of raw materials is fast dwindling. What do they do in such a situation? What is their response? They use their military might and cunning to seize control of raw materials in poor countries. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan is not to install “democratic” governments in these countries but to seize control of their oil resources.

Modern agriculture uses enormous quantities of chemicals - artificial fertilizers and pesticides which in turn poison on earth and pollute the water. These chemicals just accumulate in the human system and have a dire effect on human health. A new born baby gets its first dose of chemical toxins from the mother’s milk.

Multinationals aided by national governments are in a hurry to control vast stretches of forests, rivers and land in the Third World. These acts destroy the life supporting environment and culture of the local people. With no land, no trees, no biomass to sustain them the people have no option but to migrate to the cities and join the ranks of daily wage workers. Here they congregate in ghettos and slums and do the most menial work to keep alive.

When pollution gets out of control in the rich countries and when there is a public hue and cry then these companies promptly shift their manufacturing bases to the Third

World. But even this ploy is beginning to fail now. We know that every thing in the world is interconnected. High speed gales are bringing back the pollution from the Third World into rich countries.

America like much of the West has become a country of consumers. People have lost their identity as parents, teachers, doctors and children. They have only one identity – that of a consumer. Whatever stuff people buy is seldom used for any length of time. 99% of all what people buy is dumped into the rubbish bin within the first six months itself. In the last fifty years American houses have doubled in size to accommodate this burgeoning stuff.

Companies resort to two major gimmicks to sell their stuff. Firstly, obsolescence is built in as part of the design. In other words the things they make are “designed for the dump”. Scores of such chuck away, throw away objects abound today - plastic cups, foam plates, throwaway cameras and even computers. The faster people throw the more they buy.

The other gimmick to increase sales is through advertisements. Glitzy magazines and TV bombard people everyday single day with over 3000 advertisement. What do these ads convey? What is their message? These ads tell people that their skin is dark, their hair is messy, their cars are ancient etc. The entire ad industry thrives firstly on creating false needs and then inculcating a feeling of guilt in consumers in order to prod them to buy more of the latest gizmos.

People are buying more but this over consumption is surprisingly not making them happy. They come home after work to relax and watch TV. But the TV tells them that they need this, they need that. And off they go to the super store to buy more. Sometimes they take up another job so that they can earn more, to buy more. This consumerist spree sucks them dry and they have no time for things which make them happy and which matter the most – time to spend with their family and friends.

Well you might have sensed that this mad spree of production and consumption will not be sustainable in the long run. We just have one earth – whose resources are limited. We need to live simply, so that others can simply live. When we buy something the truth is that we do not pay its real cost. But then who pays for them? These costs are “externalized”. It is the poor people in the Third World who pay these costs by the loss of their natural resource base, by the loss of their clean air and water.

Answers to many such questions about survival and sustainability can be found in this wonderful 20-minute film. This film was uploaded on the website (www.storyofstuff.com) a few months back for free downloads. Over a hundred thousand people downloaded it the very first month. It has now been viewed by over 2 million people across the globe. This 50 MB film can be easily downloaded and plays well in a M-Player or a VLC-Player. By making such a contextual and relevant film and placing it in the public domain Andrei Leonard has set new benchmarks for activism on the web. It shows that activism is also about action to expand and ensure the greater well being of all. Apart from reminding us of global warming, changing climates, multinational rapacity, and apathy of national governments, air and water pollution, the film also reminds us of our own responsibilities as citizens of planet earth – LIVE SIMPLY, THAT OTHERS MY SIMPLY LIVE.

