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SPECIAL STORY

TATA'S MASTERSTROKE

THE INSIDE STORY
OF HOW MIGHTY
AIR INDIA UNIONS
FELL TO TATA'S
SMART MOVES

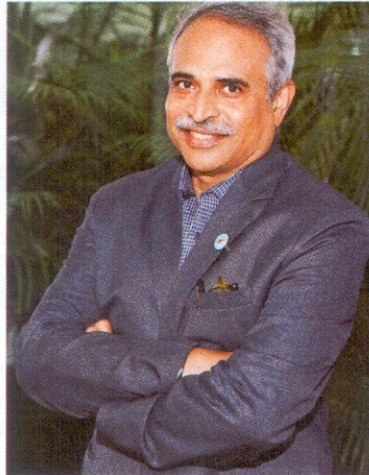


Dejected Workers in
a Global Dream Pg.30

Eco-Anxiety as
Psychological Condition Pg.79

'We Use 90% Recycled Content in Polyester Packaging Film'

Jeevaraj Pillai, Joint president of flexible packaging at UFlex, believes that improved plastic waste collection and recycling is more helpful in fighting the menace of plastic pollution than finding an alternative material to plastic. In a conversation with Outlook Business, he elaborates on how UFlex pursues circularity by scaling up the use of recycled content in its packaging applications



Q This World Environment Day focuses on solutions to plastic pollution and UFlex has been a leader in this aspect. How do you plan to up your game?

At UFlex, we have always believed in three pillars to address plastic waste pollution. They are source reduction, source substitution, and the use of sustainable packaging material. We were the first company, back in 1994, to establish recycling plants where multi-layer (MLP) plastics, considered difficult to recycle, could be treated. Sustainability was not a buzzword back then, but our efforts are bearing fruit today. We are recycling close to 30,000 metric tonnes of plastic waste, setting an example for the industry, the government, and the public.

When it comes to source substitution, we try to substitute elements of multilayer plastic by way of reducing the thickness or using alternate material. One of the steps we have taken is to recycle polyester (PET) bottles, convert them into a packaging film and use this in the packaging application. This was something we started five years back and today we are using 90% recycled content in polyester packaging film.

The third pillar which we always talk about is biodegradation. We have been investing money into this technology where we try to develop

something which will biodegrade in the environment without any special composting conditions. These three pillars will benefit not just India, but the global community as well.

Q What prompted you to start addressing the issue of plastic pollution thirty years ago?

Back in 1992-93 when we were contemplating a large packaging plant, our packaging consumption was around 2-3 kg per capita in India compared to over 100 kg in more developed nations like the United States and Japan. We realized that when India starts substituting paper, tin, and glass with plastic packaging material, there will be a lot of waste. It would have been a huge challenge to manage that waste because our country had a rudimentary infrastructure for waste collection.

This is where we thought about building a packaging manufacturing plant that has zero solid waste discharge. We realized over a period of time that recycling itself is a self-sustaining business model with a reasonable ROI for sustenance. This was the vision of our group chairman and managing director, Mr. Ashok Chaturvedi, that when India goes to 12-15 kg per capita consumption, we should not face a situation where we don't have the technology to recycle plastic waste.

Q How are you planning to achieve circularity?

Circularity does not end with recycling alone. If you recycle and then make use of the recycled content in packaging applications, only then do we close the circularity loop. India is currently a net importer of polymer. We need to see to it that recycled content remains in circularity, thereby reducing imports and the consumption of virgin fossil plastics.

Q Since you work across geographies, what do you think of the Indian government's regulations on plastic pollution?

India is one of the first countries which has come out with EPR Guidelines (extended producer responsibility) and is in the middle of implementation. This is a comprehensive document that gives a pathway for the next 10 years. It does not ask people to recycle 100% today. We have time to think about it, put money into the required infrastructure, and start implementing the EPR which is the need of the day. We believe the government is doing a fantastic job by addressing the pain points of the industry.

Q A glass bottle, which has a larger environmental footprint than a plastic bottle, is often marketed as a popular replacement for the latter. How can such issues of greenwashing be addressed?

The government, as a stakeholder, is very clear on this matter but the general public and brand owners are not so clear. Some are interested in greenwashing to project themselves as an environmentally friendly company.

In this case, all we need to do is make the public aware that glass consumes more energy and has multiple times more carbon emissions than plastic packaging. Instead of innovating an alternate material to plastic, all we need to do is to address waste collection and recycling.