

# Greening Industry

*He is a prosperous NRI Londoner whose heart still beats for Palampur; his ancestral hometown in Himachal Pradesh. Having spent more than three decades as a hard-nosed businessman, Madhav Mehra is now devoted to environmental protection and cleaning up of industrial practices. The chairman of the World Environment Foundation (WEF) tells Narayani Ganesh that the only way to resolve the man-environment face-off is to go back to our tradition, which emphasises a holistic approach to almost everything:*

*What brings you to the small town of Palampur?*

Three years ago, I visited Palampur in Himachal Pradesh after 40 years. I re-discovered the beauty of the place. Within nine months, in 2001, I constructed a convention centre on the site of my ancestral home, and was determined to make it the focus of an annual meet on the importance of living in harmony with the environment.

*You had Sri Sri Ravishankar as the key note speaker at the recently-concluded fifth annual meet of the Global Environmental Foundation. Why a spiritual head?*

The Indian psyche has always respected the environment. Our tradition tells us to celebrate life through a holistic approach. Sadly, not many of us heed this advice. It is impossible to evaluate the environment in economic terms. Can we quantify the financial worth of say, oxygen? We really don't know the value of a clean environment — air, water, mountains... By acting in a way that adversely impacts on environment we are compromising the future of not just our children but all future generations.

*You were an industrialist for many years. Don't you think most of the environmental ills today stem from irresponsible production processes?*

Absolutely. A lot of energy has been wasted. How many countries, for example, use renewable energy? In the last four years, however, there has been a tremendous change in perceptions. From exploiters, industrialists have now become eco-savvy — they realise that it pays to be emission-conscious. Today, how green you are is an important component of your market value. According to the worldwide millennium survey (2000-01), 60 per cent of all those interviewed said that they would punish companies if they were found to be emitters or socially unfriendly. With this increased public awareness, pollution is coming down, albeit gradually.

*Can you give one example of a polluting unit that has now turned clean?*

You must be aware of the storm raised sometime ago in the wake of reports that smoke from the Mathura refinery was polluting our single-most valued brand: the

Taj Mahal. Black smoke had stained the Taj's white marble and even corroded parts of the unique structure. Today, birds are migrating to Mathura to drink the clean water that is being recycled from the refinery.

That's why the WEF has instituted the Golden Peacock Awards. These awards are given to corporates that have a proven record in controlling pollution, minimising waste and putting an emphasis on recycling. In other words, total eco-effective management. I come from a management background. I find that the concerns of customers are often very short term — most are not bothered about where the material they buy comes from or where it goes. Not many pause to ask whether it is bio-degradable. Titanium batteries in cellphones, for instance, are non-bio-degradable. On the other hand, Citizen makes watches that can be powered even by candle-light... Eventually, we should think in terms of replacing the income tax with an environmental tax — not just for industry but also for individuals. Savers can be given credits. *But it is not easy to innovate without official help...*

We've got to get rid of old technology and bring in new technology. What happened to the shuttle that claimed the lives of so many, including our own Kalpana Chawla? The culprit was old technology — NASA too

is run by powerful contractors and they are an important political votebank. The tragedy could've been averted by using a new type of heat resistant tiles.

*How practical would it be to replace a certain production process with another, newer one?*

There is a difference between making

ing a bigger candle and making a completely new product like a tubelight. So re-training the same people can be difficult. That's why radical innovation has very few takers. Often, recessions happen because there is no demand for what you are producing — people want something new. Teenagers make up the major section of today's consumers — yet most of the board directors are above 50. So there is a difference in perception. The market is driven by teenagers, yet they have no say in production. In the same way, home products — used largely by women — are designed mostly by men.

*Some have argued that the golden quadrilateral road network will cause a lot of environmental damage...*

I think it's a very good idea. Why has China progressed so fast while we're still stuck? Because they have realised the importance of good infrastructure. As for fears that the golden quadrilateral will cause environmental degradation, it will be minimal compared to the large-scale chopping of trees and other acts of degradation caused by poverty. It is very important to have planned infrastructure.

## Q&A

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Udayshankar