

# Workers connect...

## Can Self-Regulation solve Climate Crisis?

Imagine eating an ATM card for breakfast once a week. We are not out of our mind. A study by the University of Newcastle, Australia found that we are on an average consuming about 2,000 tiny pieces of plastic every week – the equivalent weight of an ATM card! This plastic is making its way into our body through food and water. Drinking water and water used in cooking is the primary source of plastic in our food chain. Shell fish, beer and salt follow suit in their high plastic content.

### **How does plastic reach our food chain?**



This whale was washed up in the Philippines in March 2019. It died from 40kg of plastic bags in its stomach.

Do you remember a time when you had to carry a cloth or a jute bag to the market to buy groceries? Sugar and dal back then came in paper bags which could spill. You had to carry a glass bottle for buying cooking oil. The 1990s liberated us of many things, including this. We no longer had to carry our bags and bottles to shops. Instead shops gave us what we bought, wet or dry, in plastic bags and containers & life became simpler.

**Single Use Plastic:** Today plastic is all around us. Companies which produce plastic, love it. They have successfully sold us the idea that plastic is cheap, efficient and that packing, storing and carrying things would be impossible without it.

World over more than 10 lakh plastic bags are used every minute.

Plastic packaging has helped the companies reach what they call 'bottom of the pyramid' customers. In the corporate marketing world, these are consumers who cannot afford to use a product at the existing price. For them, the companies tweak the quantity and quality of the product into small sachets thereby reducing the selling price to reach these customers. For instance, a 650ml Clinic Plus shampoo costs Rs. 234.50. For a daily wage worker in rural

India this is unaffordable when the minimum agricultural wage is on an average less than Rs. 150 per day. But, the company offers a sachet of the same at Re. 1 for 6 ml which makes it highly affordable. The company also pushes this package into remote villages through their marketing network, reaching the smallest pan shop on the street and into homes, via advertising on television. It sells a dream along with its product – a dream of a better world – a dream that allows every person irrespective

of their economic condition, their caste, their religion, their education transcend to a better world through the use of this product.

Companies often also have a vested interest in selling articles in smaller packets. Let us take the example of a sachet of tomato ketchup. A bottle of 950 g costs Rs. 89 off the shelf, while a sachet of 8 g costs only Rs. 2 making it easily affordable. The per unit cost of ketchup in the bottle is 9 paise while in the sachet, it is 25 paise! So it is more profitable to sell ketchup in sachets than in a reusable glass bottle. So the poor unknowingly pay more to buy this product than the rich do. And if we multiply this with the number of buyers in each category, it makes more business sense to focus on the poor than

the rich. And this business strategy is reliant on single-use plastic packaging. It cannot be reused either by the consumers or the company and finds its way into garbage dumps, into rivers, into our soil. This is consumed by animals, fish and reaches our food chain.



**Tech Devices:** It is official: there are now over **1.26 billion more** mobile connections than people worldwide. With mobile phones and connections becoming cheaper, it is no longer a luxury good. Then there are ear phones, television, laptops, refrigerators, washing machines, microwave ovens, solar panels – every one of these has plastic in it. Globally, 44.7 million metric tonnes of e-waste was produced in 2016, equal in weight to 4500 Eiffel towers!

Reaching the landfill however is the last phase in the life cycle of a plastic product. The production of the plastic is equally draining on the environment. It requires a lot of water to produce plastic and the production process often leaves residue which pollutes the environment.

Take for example the mobile phone – it consists of 40% metals, 40% plastics, and 20% ceramics and trace materials. The circuit boards are made from mined materials containing copper, gold, lead, nickel, zinc and other metals. The manufacturing process requires crude oil for plastic, and sand and limestone for fiberglass. Many of these materials are known as “persistent toxins” and can stay in the environment for long periods of time. Other major components are battery, power banks and portable chargers. These batteries contain nickel, cobalt, zinc, cadmium, and copper. These are all mined from the earth and very toxic for the people who mine these and dispose these as well as for the planet, once disposed. Larger

the device, more plastic and metals are used in manufacturing it.

It is not just the material that is used to produce it, that has an adverse impact on our environment. The machines that are used for manufacturing these devices, the manufacturing and the business processes have an equally harmful impact.

**‘Creative Destruction’:** Two investigations, one in France and one in the UK, found that Amazon destroys its unsold items. In June, France announced a crackdown on the destruction of unsold or returned consumer products. This ban will come into effect in the next four years. According to government estimates, over 650 million euros worth of new consumer products are thrown away or destroyed in France every year. British fashion brand, Burberry last year admitted that it burns unsold clothes, accessories and perfume worth over 31 million euros annually to retain their exclusivity. They are not an exception in the industry.

To retain or gain an edge over their competition in the market, companies incessantly engage in product and process innovation through which they create ‘new’ products. These ‘new’ products replace the earlier ones. The older ones are then taken off the shelves and destroyed to ensure new products are bought.

We see this always with mobile phones. The old Nokia phone that allowed us to make and receive calls and send messages is no longer available in the market. We are forced to buy fancy touch phones, which many of us even find difficult to use. Further, these are more expensive and have less use life. So we are pushed into buying these and the older versions of the phones are destroyed so that we cannot buy those. Management books call this ‘creative destruction’. This process is also not a one-time cycle, it is a continuous cycle that keeps repeating itself. As one company innovates and creates a ‘new’ product, profits for the company soar as all consumers rush to buy the ‘new’ product. But competing companies eventually ‘catch up’ on the innovation and the product no longer remains ‘new’ and profits shrink. And once again a ‘new’ product has to be launched to push the profit margin higher. What is also critical in this cycle is: (i) short use

life of the 'new' products, and (ii) destruction of the old product which ensures that people are forced to buy the 'new' product.

This constant push for producing 'new' products means companies need access to an unhindered supply of minerals and precious metals on the cheap. This takes companies into mineral rich low- and middle- income countries in Africa and Asia to source these minerals. The mining industry is notorious for violating workers' rights, promoting child labour and being ruthless with the environment and communities living in these mining areas.

Even when the supply of minerals ensured, companies do not stop. They innovate their production process to improve their competitive edge further. Robots and machines replace humans, which again have their own shelf life and in few years find their way to a waste dump.

The exploitation resources of countries in the global south continues through the life cycle of the products. Once these 'new' products are bought and discarded in the global north, these discarded products are shipped back to the countries in the global south to be disposed off. The understanding in the global north is that by sending away their waste, their environment and people remain protected from the harmful effects of this waste. It is possibly partially true as far as the direct impacts are concerned but pollution unfortunately cannot be restricted by political boundaries. Germany and France recorded temperatures as high as 38 - 45 degree Celsius this June. Global warming is a reality, not a perception of a few and it affects the poor more, both in the global north and in the global south.

The severe water crisis in Chennai in the last two months led to violent clashes in the city, offices have had to be shut down and has left people more dependent on private water vendors. 1 truck of water supplied by the Municipal body is priced at Rs.1000 but access to it is severely rationed, while private vendors are selling the same for Rs. 3000 – 6000. This makes it beyond the reach of the working poor of the city.

### ***Is Ethical Consumption a solution?***

Ethical consumption is often mooted as an

alternative to consumerism sustained by exploitation of people and natural resources. This is rooted in arousing the sense of morality of the consumer by taking producers' and workers' rights along the supply chain into consideration, not harming animals in the process and keeping the environment protected. And all this of course comes at a premium. An ethically produced egg by a company in Tamil Nadu costs Rs. 25 a piece while a standard egg costs Rs. 4-6 in our country! The argument put out is often that the 25 rupee-egg does not hurt the animal, the farmer and the environment. It may be true but what about the 'bottom of the pyramid' consumer who could in 25 rupees buy 5 eggs and feed her entire family a meal of egg curry? Can we opt for a solution where she must stop feeding eggs to her children because she cannot afford the Rs. 25 egg? This would imply that only those who can afford the Rs. 25 egg deserve the nutrition that it provides.

Ethical consumption is yet another method of making money for companies. This marketing strategy is one that reaches out to that section of elite consumers who feel guilty of their privilege. These companies through their billion dollar media campaigns establish the narrative of 'ethical consumption'. Ethical consumers switch to an air conditioner or refrigerator that consumes less electricity. However, they still buy this 'new feel-good' AC. Similarly for clothes and food and any other product. The consumption does not change, the product changes. This form of consumerism does very little to save the environment - it shifts consumption from one kind of products to a different kind of products.

This creates a division in the world between the rich who can afford to be ethical and the poor who are forced to buy products of everyday use in plastic packaging. It portrays the bottom of the pyramid consumers as criminals destroying the planet by using shampoo sachets while it absolves the corporates who push this 'use and throw' strategy that multiplies their profits and destroys the planet.

In 2014, CocaCola had to shut down one of its units at Varanasi, over protests that the bottling plant was extracting too much groundwater that breached the conditions of the license. The plant was also releasing effluents that



contained pollutants beyond the permissible limit. People living in the area held protests, filed complaints and finally the Pollution Control Board ordered CocaCola to shut down and take suitable measures to recharge the depleting groundwater level by twice the amount they have already extracted. This is one small example – there are many across the world and in our country where people have come together and held corporations responsible for the damages they cause not just to people but to the environment. Many struggles have been won and many more have been lost in the face of the power of corporations.

Change is possible only through collective action. The fight against climate change and our collective access to natural resources cannot be through individual consumer actions that make some people feel good.

### **Policy News**

#### **Tamil Nadu: Government declares auto component industry public utility**

26 June 2019: The Tamil Nadu government has declared auto component industry as public utility through a Government Order (G.O) valid for 6 months. The G.O has been promulgated in the backdrop of the successful strikes in auto component manufacturing sector in and around Chennai. Workers are now mandated to serve strike notice 6 weeks in advance and cannot strike if conciliation process commences. Strikes cannot take place during the pendency of the conciliation nor until 7 days post conclusion.

#### **Central Government cuts contribution rate to Employees State Insurance (ESI)**

13 June 2019: Effective from 1 July, rates for contributions to ESI have been reduced from 6.5% to 4% resulting in overall depletion of funds for the scheme. Employer's contribution has been cut from the existing 4.75% to 3.25% and that of the employees from 1.75% to 0.75%. The move will adversely impact 12.87lakh workers who are currently covered under the scheme.

#### **Maharashtra: Government Committee finds numerous cases of bonded labour in IT industry**

11 June 2019: Taking cognizance of news

reports, Maharashtra government constituted a committee to probe cases of bonded labour existing in IT industry in the state. The committee found that IT companies were withholding severance pay of laid-off workers and enforcing 'unfair' bond terms on new employees. The committee also found that a small portion of employees' salaries were kept as deposits and employees were fined ₹75,000 to ₹1 lakh as penalty for resigning before the completion of their bond term.

The committee has directed the labour department to order IT companies to return employee's original documents within 30 days and issue notices to IT companies against whom complaints were received.

#### **Andhra Pradesh: ASHA workers get 300% wage hike**

3 June 2019: Government has hiked the honorarium for ASHA workers employed by medical and health departments from the existing ₹3,000 to ₹10,000 per month. The wage hike will be applicable from 1 June 2019 benefitting around 40,000 workers.

### **Legal News**

#### **Tamil Nadu: SHRC orders reinstatement of worker with ₹ 20.67 lakhs as back wages**

21 June 2019: The State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) has ordered the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) to reinstate a worker who was terminated in 2004 for allegations of irregular work. The labour department had held the termination wrongful in 2010 and ordered re-instatement of the worker. However, the TNSTC denied work to the workman for 8 years. Taking cognizance of the matter SHRC held TNSTC was violating the human rights of the workman and ordered immediate reinstatement of the worker along with a payment of ₹20.67lakhs as back wages.

#### **Kerala: Labour department to prosecute 125 shops for failure to provide sitting facilities to women workers**

19 June 2019: In a surprise check conducted by the Labour Enforcement Department of over 500 jewelry shops, textile shops and shopping malls, 125 establishments were found to be in violation of the rules of the Kerala Shops and

Establishments Act amendment last year which mandated sitting provisions for sales workers. Textile shops and shopping malls account for largest number of violators with 31% and 42% respectively failing to provide sitting facilities to women workers. Notices have been issued to all 125 shops and cancelling licenses is under consideration.

## **Collective Bargaining**

### **Himachal Pradesh: Blue Star Employees Union inks long term settlement with management**

27 June 2018: The Blue Star Employees Union has signed a 3-year long term wage and productivity settlement with the management. The settlement will be valid with retrospective effect from July 2018 and will remain valid till June 2020, covering over 120 workers. The settlement would lead to a monthly hike of ₹11,000 in wages and a certificate allowance of ₹1250 per month.

### **Tamil Nadu: 87-day strike ends with victory for Asahi workers**

20 June 2019: Workers of the Japanese MNC Asahi India Glass Ltd. have ended their 87-day long strike which commenced on 25 March 2019 after successful conciliatory meetings with the labour commissioner and district collector. The company has agreed to revert the suspension of the 6 workers suspended in March 2019 and cancel the show-cause notices issued to other workers. The management and union have also agreed to finalise the matter of dismissal of 28 workers along with wage demands within 6 months.

### **Delhi: 53 Safai Karmcharis win permanency at Ambedkar University**

13 June 2019: 53 contract Safai workers whose services were terminated in May 2019 have won regular employment at Ambedkar University. The workers were rendered jobless after the contractor to whom the university had outsourced sanitation work was changed. Workers, supported by the student's union went on strike demanding regular employment, proper equipment, benefits, facilities and changes in university administration. The successful strike has also led to the formation of a university recognised internal committee

with workers as members to look into precarious nature employment of Safai workers in other Ambedkar University campuses.

### **Maharashtra: Bus transport workers sign MoU with BEST management**

11 June 2019: After an extended deadlock, with workers threatening to go on strike again, management of Brihanmumbai Electricity Supply and Transport finally signed the agreement formulated in January after the 9-day strike. 13,000 transport workers will now receive a 10-step raise. BEST management has also agreed to drop plans to induct buses on wet leases and will continue to maintain its fleet of 3,337 buses which will be operated by unionized drivers and conductors.

### **Telangana: Police arrests 100 ASHA workers for demanding payment of due wages**

11 June 2019: ASHA workers conducted a state wide protest in front of 25 district collectorate offices demanding revision of wages as promised by the government in 2016 and immediate release of 5 month's pending wages. Pending wages include allowances receivable for work during election season like checking the status of voter registration and distributing election-related material. The government has responded by putting over 100 protesting ASHA workers under arrest to suppress the strike.

### **Maharashtra: Metro construction workers launch hunger strike over unpaid wages**

2 June 2019: Denied wages for over 5 months, workers employed by the Joint Venture of Hindustan Construction Company Limited and Al Fara'a engaged by Maharashtra Metro for the construction of the Pune metro line, launched a hunger strike to demand payment of dues. The companies have been claimed that delay in releasing funds by Maharashtra Metro Corporation has led to the delay in payment of wages. However, plagued with inconsistencies and delays since the outset of the project, the Joint Venture's scope was reduced by Maharashtra Metro and given to another construction company last year.

## **Discrimination**

### **Tamil Nadu: Dalit anganwadi workers**

## ***transferred under pressure from locals***

**17 June 2019:** State Human Rights commission sought a report from the Madurai Collector regarding the transfer 2 dalit anganwadi workers due to pressure from some upper caste persons and asked district administration whether it failed in protecting the workers' human rights. The 2 workers, who were assigned to ICDS centre on 3 June 2019 were threatened away from work by some locals for being dalits. Some of them even attacked the local dalit colony, attacking people and destroying property to 'teach them a lesson'. Police have remanded 11 accused and filed cases under SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and sections of IPC.

### ***Workplace Safety***

#### **Construction**

On 9 June 2019, 4 workers; Ezhumalai (40), Anthony Samy, (41), Kathirvelu (60) and Amsavalli were injured while undertaking repairs of a house in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Police intend to question the house owner.

On 9 June 2019, 1 worker; Arasiah (46) was killed when a live wire snapped and fell on him. The worker was engaged in constructing a roof when the incident happened. He was provided no safety equipment. An FIR has been lodged against the building owner and two contractors.

On 10 June 2019, 2 workers; Neeraj (24) and Pyar Singh (34) died when a compressor exploded at a road widening site in Bharmour, Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh.

On 16 June 2019, 3 workers; Prabhu Rao (29), Krishna Yadav (26) and Sumanthkumar (22) died and 20 were injured as a water tank being constructed by the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) collapsed. Police have registered a case of a criminal negligence against six persons — two from SMC Infrastructures; two from Enviro Control Associates; a BWSSB assistant executive engineer and an assistant engineer and also arrested them. The BWSSB has suspended three officials in connection with the tragedy.

On 18 June 2019, 2 workers; Ranjit Kaur and Karnail Singh died and 1 worker was injured when the wall of an under construction rice

sheller collapsed in Ludhiana. Police have initiated proceedings under Section 174 of the Code of Criminal Procedure.

On 23 June 2019, 2 workers; Govind and Asarana died in an explosion while laying water and sewage pipelines for a commercial establishment in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Police have booked the house owner for causing death by negligence.

On 24 June 2019, 2 workers; Sahu and Chandan Leka died and 1 worker; Panchu Nath was injured when wall of under-construction house collapsed on them in Jajpur, Odisha.

#### **Manufacturing**

On 4 June 2019, 1 worker; Golu Kashyap (21) died in an explosion at the storage unit of Regenesys Industries Pvt Ltd., located in Bommalaramaram, Hyderabad, Telangana. Police have registered a case under IPC section 304-A (causing death due to rash or negligent act).

On 11 June 2019, 1 worker; Vicky Rajput (27) and 2 engineers Ji Jian (34) and Zhang Yang (37) died when the boiler exploded at Pusilin Biotechnology Private Limited. FIRs have been registered against the director, general manager and manager under IPC sections 304 (culpable homicide) and 34 (common intention).

On 15 June 2019, 3 workers; Jagadiswara Rao (30), K Suresh (32) and Gopal Naidu (35) were killed and as many critically injured after a boiler exploded at Balaji Chemicals Factory in the Bobbili Industrial Centre located 60 km from Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh. District collector has ordered enquiry into Balaji Chemicals and other factories located in the industrial centre.

On 21 June 2019, a contract worker, Brajesh Kumar (23) died due to severe burns and another worker was injured when the under-construction warship "Visakhapatnam" caught fire at the Mazagaon Docks in Mumbai Maharashtra. An enquiry has been initiated into the cause of the fire.

#### **Sanitation**

On 15 June 2019, 4 sanitation workers; Mahesh Patanwadiya, Ashok Harijan, Brijesh Harijan, Mahesh Harijan and 3 hotel workers; Ajay Vasava

(24), Vijay Chauhan (22) and Sahdev Vasava (22) died from suffocation while cleaning a septic tank of the Darshan Hotel in Vadodara, Gujarat. Police have lodged a case under section 299 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder) and section 304-A (causing death due to negligence) of IPC.

On 16 June 2019, 2 sanitation workers; Shahbuddin (23) and Raidul (18) died of suffocation while cleaning a sewer in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Another sanitation worker; Maidul called for help but it took 2 hours for police and fire department to arrive on the spot.

### **Others**

On 9 June 2019, a landslide in a murrum quarry in Keonijhar district of Odisha resulted in 3 workers dead and 1 injured.

On 19 June 2019, 2 workers; Raju Sharma (22) and Ashtiyak Khan (23), fell to their deaths after crane supporting snapped under pressure. The workers were cleaning windows of the 10 storey Videocon Tower in the Jhandelwala Area, New Delhi. The workers had neither helmets or belts nor was there any safety equipment on site. A case under IPC sections 304A (causing death by negligence) and 287 (negligent conduct with respect to machinery) has been registered against MS Enterprise, the company that was handling the Videocon Tower's cleaning work.

## **News from Around the World**

### ***Brazil: Oil workers oppose austerity led pension reforms***

14 June 2019: Workers of the state owned Petroleo Brasileiro SA conducted a 24 hour strike across 8 states and 9 refineries against pension reforms which seek to raise the retirement age and workers' contributions. These reforms are part of the austerity package proposed to revive Brazil's flagging economy. Workers have also protested the privatisation of Petrobras by way of selling company assets. In Sao Paulo, public transport workers also struck in support of oil workers.

### ***Japan: Uber Eats workers unionise***

13 June 2019: Demanding equal treatment as

employees along with social security benefits and accident compensation, delivery workers working for Uber Eats have unionized. Uber Eats operates across 10 cities in Japan and is estimated to employ over 15,000 delivery workers. Declaring workers to be independent contractors, Uber Eats has refused to recognise the union. Uber Eats' parent company Uber has been facing several charges of denying workers their rights by claiming them to be 'independent contractors' across USA and Europe.

### ***Qatar: FIFA admits to labour violations in relation to the 2022 football world cup***

12 June 2019: An undercover investigation by German broadcaster WDR found delayed wages to be recurrent theme for migrant workers employed in construction of facilities for the 2022 football world cup. Featuring interviews with migrant workers, the report highlights a range of additional abuses including expired visas, poor accommodation and hazardous working conditions. FIFA responded with a press release acknowledging violation of labour standards and particularly naming the company TAWASOL – a sub-contractor in the construction of the Al Bayt Stadium.

### ***Kenya: Domestic workers union gets recognition***

9 June 2019: Despite being denied registration on multiple occasions by the registrar of unions on account that there were other federations representing domestic workers, the National Union of Domestic Workers through a court application finally won recognition. The court upheld their right to form a union and directed the registrar to register the National Union of Domestic Workers. However, the court advised the union to restrict its membership to only domestic workers employed in private households reasoning that domestic workers engaged by commercial establishments are covered by other unions.

### ***Sudan: General strike for end to military rule***

9 June 2019: Workers across Sudan went on general strike and engaged in a campaign of civil disobedience demanding that the military relinquish power to civilians. The military government deployed rapid security forces in many parts of the country including the capital



Khartoum with barricades set up and internet and other communication lines cut.

## Corporate Watch

### Yoga for Impunity!

The Patanjali group of Baba Ramdev, through companies controlled by his business associate, Acharya Balkrishna, and some of their closely-associated land dealers, acquired more than 400 acres of forested common lands in the Aravalli hills in Kot, just off the state highway connecting Gurugram and Faridabad, according to a Business Standard report of 6 June.

Home to about 250 families, about 80 per cent of the village land falls in the hilly terrain classified as Shamlat land or commons held collectively by villagers. In 2011, the Supreme Court had directed that all common land in the hills should be returned to panchayats and any sale of such land was termed illegal.

The panchayat in 2011 filed a case to recover all its Shamlat land back from those who had purchased it illegally. The case dragged on until four individuals intervened in the case in 2018, claiming they collectively represented more than 321 of the disputed owners of village commons.

According to the BS report, these four people presented power of attorneys for about 400 acres of land. One Mr. Praveen Kumar, who was acting as the authorized representative of a company called Herbo Ved Gram Pvt. Ltd., submitted copies of 104 power of attorneys as proof in the court. The three other companies used to acquire these lands were Omgreen Agro Private Limited, Vedanta Enterprises and Jadibuti Krishi Private Limited.

According to the report, these transactions for acquisition of large-scale forest land took place between 2014 and 2016. During this

period, purchase, registration and mutation of land records to reflect sale were not permitted without the approval of the Panchayat and state officials. Thus these companies used the Power of Attorney route to bypass the need for recording the change of ownership by keeping the deals discreet.

As per statutory regulatory filings until 2016-17, Patanjali Ayurved Limited owned 100% shares of Herbo Ved Gram Private Limited. In the following financial year, 2017-18, the ownership of 99% of these shares were transferred to Acharya Balkrishna.

To buy these lands Mr. Sharma received an unsecured interest-free advance of Rs. 3.15 crore from another company called, Verve Corporation. The two directors of Verve corporation were Mrs Saroj Sharma, sister of Praveen Sharma, and her husband, Mr. K V Sharma. Not surprisingly, Verve, too, was owned by the Patanjali Ayurved Limited until 2016-17 and was transferred to Acharya Balkrishna in 2017-18.

In February this year, in an attempt to legalise these deals, the Haryana Assembly amended the Punjab Land Preservation Act, 1990, opening up thousands of acres in the Aravalli and Shivalik mountain ranges for real estate development and mining which would be a major threat to environment and ecology of Delhi NCR. The amended law excludes tracts of land included in the final development plans or town improvement plans from the ambit of the PLPA. The amendment was to be applicable with retrospective as well as prospective effect. In March, the Supreme Court ordered the Haryana government to not implement the amendments it made to the Act.

