



WasteWatch

A Newsletter by Chintan-Bharti Waste Resource Centre

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Diaper Boom



In a recent article, the Independent recently confirmed a ghastly growing in India: that nappies are the future of babies bottoms. Not any nappies, but disposable diapers. According to the publication, the markets lie in unexpected places-the lower income communities in the developing world. If you thought that this made no sense, you are

right. It doesn't. Most Indians 35 or older will recall the old fashioned old cloth, softened by age, stitched into shape and tied up as a diaper. And about 98% of babies under 2 in India still use these nappies. If the manufacturers have their way, this would be a thing of the past. They are eyeing the 55 million children under 2 in India, who could be using disposable diapers.

The problem with this whole thing is the sheer waste of materials itself. Look around honestly. People do use disposable diapers and there is no way to dispose them off except to let the Municipality take them to landfills or to burn them where the systems don't work well. How does this matter?

Conventional diapers are crisp and white because of the chlorine used in them, a factor that is likely to make them much less safe for a baby. It's also likely to make it much less safe for everyone else, because when burnt, chlorine releases a range of toxic gases. At higher temperatures, we could even find dioxin formation. Dioxin is one of the most poisonous gases known to humankind and severely impacts health in diverse ways. On its own, chlorine too produces a range of health problems.

Landfills are another kind of crisis. They are unwelcome in an increasingly crowded country and they pollute ground water, the soil and the environs. After being dumped here, they do not degrade easily, given the plastic lining inside.

In contrast, how often do you see soiled cloth nappies in bins or landfills? Rarely. The logic is that you reuse the nappy several times over, following the first R of the 3 Rs of waste handling.

Disposables have a small, not totally absent place in modern lifestyle. The central concern is that of extracting materials in a sustainable way and using them innovatively such that their life cycle is prolonged, before they are converted into waste. In the United States, many parents are asking why they should not use washable nappies instead of disposable ones? Even there, there is a small movement to revert to a less wasteful way to bring up babies.

Let's look at some of the figures from the Independent. If you had a baby today, you'd use at least 5000 disposable diapers, equal to 130 black garbage bags. If you switched over to washable nappies, you would have about 500 pounds (which is equal to USD 930 or

Rs. 42612). And that is when you use what they call a professional nappy laundering service! With inexpensive labour costs, surely no sane person can opt for disposable nappies as an economically or ecologically viable choice.

Peer deeper and you'll see more. The markets in the developed world are somewhat static. They are there, but there is no huge spurt of babies to sell to and the reusable diaper market is aggressively positioned. Historically, this leads to the quest for new markets, whether it is for contemporary diapers or post industrial revolution fabrics. Why not sell to the vast pool of Indian babies?

There is an even bigger question that we need to ask ourselves. What is our idea of modernity? Can living in the 21st century dovetail with restricted and sensible use of resources? Does using a slickly advertised product somehow put the Indian baby on par with hundreds of others in the developed world? Fortunately, we have something inspiring to recall. A nappy consultant from the US has said about Indians : They are more concerned about throwing into the trash something as expensive as a diaper-they are used to recycling. Cheers to that!

