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How One Woman Took On The Eco-Friendly Product Market In India

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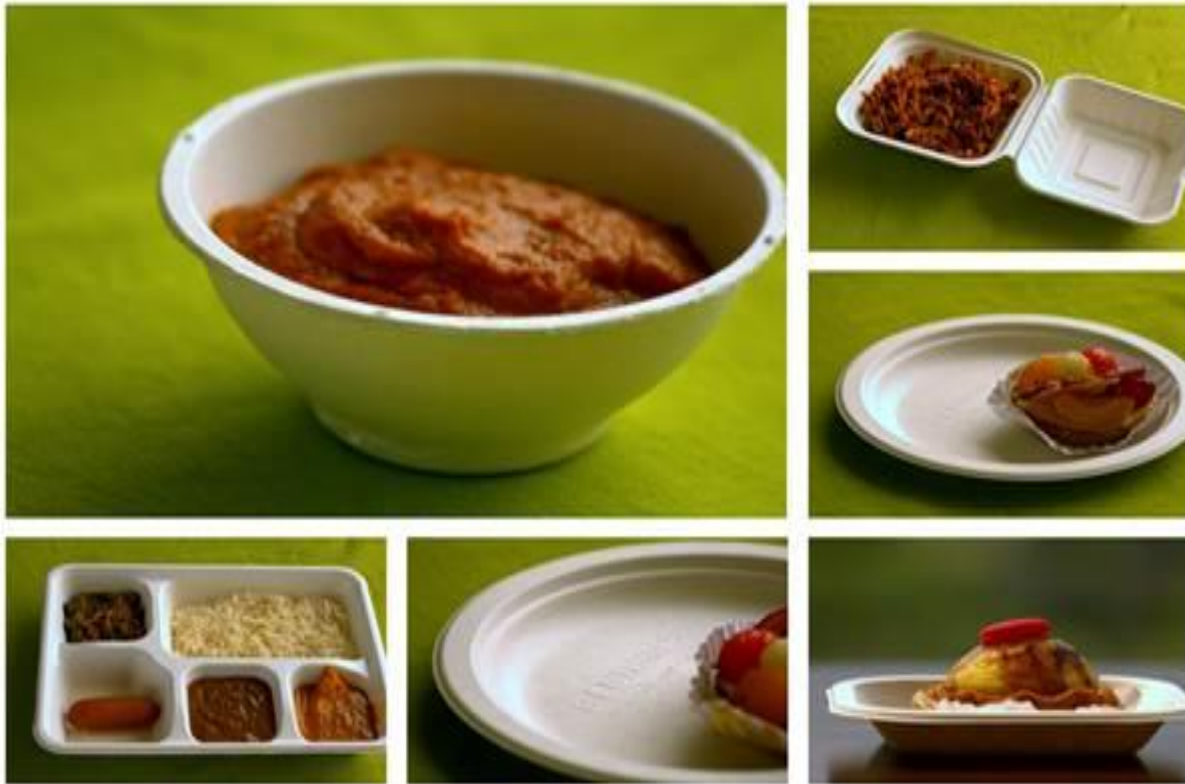
Buzzwords such as ‘environment’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘eco-friendly’ have largely eluded India in recent years. Despite media lip service, India is nowhere near the western world in terms of household awareness of the benefits of being environmentally conscious. Therefore anyone who’s not a non-governmental organizer and can take on this sector and turn a profit, is effectively a national treasure.

There are no official records of multinationals entering the sustainable business market, and zero reliable figures on any gender involvement in environmentally focused enterprises in the country.

With the lack of governmental support for the eco-friendly business market, that’s not altogether surprising. There are no tax breaks for environmentally sustainable businesses – and the [jail-worthy offense of using plastic bags and non-recycled plastic packaging](#) is totally unenforced.

So, the national treasure we’re talking about here is one female entrepreneur who decided to set up a company based on selling an ecologically sustainable product never seen in India. She had to start from the bottom rung: by educating people.

Pharmacologist Rhea Mazumdar Singhal left her job with pharmaceutical giant [Pfizer PFE +2.04%](#) in London in 2009 and moved to New Delhi, where she felt there was a need for a London-like taste of responsible living. Her idea: manufacturing disposable foodservice package – including a range of plates and cartons. The twist: the products are made of plant fiber – biodegradable and compostable in 90 days.



Ecoware's biodegradable food containers. Photo courtesy of www.ecoware.in.

Almost five years and two factories later, Singhal's company, [Ecoware](http://www.ecoware.in), has managed to create a demand it is working hard to keep up with meeting. Clients today include the five-star Oberoi Hotels & Resorts, Cinnabon, and Indian snack-giant Haldiram.

They are still the only manufacturer of ecologically sustainable plate-ware in India.

One of the biggest challenges, Singhal says, was creating awareness of the need for an environmentally friendly product – starting with educating young students about environmental awareness, to enlightening distributors enough to incentivize them to look at her product over traditionally accepted plastic.

But Delhi is not London.

“The work culture was very different from what I was used to – people in India almost mistake politeness or compassion for stupidity,” says Singhal.

Being taken seriously by the male dominated business industry – from the laborers in the factory to the distributors sitting on their mattresses in traditional by-lanes of old Delhi – was a large test of business-stamina.

“I have definitely rubbed people the wrong way because I haven't given in,” she says.



Ecoware's Rhea Mazumdar Singhal

When bidding for what ended up being her first client, the [2010 Commonwealth Games](#), held in New Delhi, competing male vendors tried to scare her off by telling Singhal early on that her business hadn't been chosen for a contract.

"Even today people will go to my vendor-base and try to sell my product samples, marked with the [Ecoware](#) brand logo, telling them 'Ecoware doesn't exist any longer'," she says. "You can't be scared, and you have to learn to laugh."

With a solid revenue and a distributor signed on for the UAE market, Singhal says she's now looking for investors to help her scale up the business and take the products further afield.

But there are still few people, let alone female entrepreneurs, getting involved in green businesses in India. Why?

"Simple lack of awareness, and inertia," says Singhal. "We need to ask ourselves why does nothing filter down – why don't we have waste segregation for houses, why do people keep littering?"

At most, households will sell their old newspapers and magazines to a "kabari-wala", the rest is pushed off with the local garbage-collector. Plastic happily decorates the roads, walls, and even trees of pretty much every habitable space in India.



Trash tipped onto the streets in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Photo courtesy of wikipedia commons.

According to Singhal, governmental support of green businesses – tax breaks, environmental guidance, enforcement of sensible laws, and increased education from a primary level – is the incentive needed for greater involvement.

"It is really important for all of us, that more people do enter this market in India," she says.