

# CONSUMER VOICE

A Monthly Magazine of Consumer Interest

## Digital Camcorders:

high on expectation,  
low on performance

**13** models  
tested & rated



**Postal department fined for tampering with parcels**

**Wellness:  
Cashing in on health concerns**





Mangoes at throw-away rates at Subhiksha, Reliance jumping into selling household wares at its own mega-marts, the global giant Wal-Mart making a foray into the Indian retail market promising to sell soap, oil, and toothpaste at rock bottom prices-it sounds like Indian consumers are in for still more choice. But will there actually be more choice, or will a few months of 'happy-deals' lead to a lifetime of monopolistic markets and manipulations by corporate giants who as it is are raking in trucks-full of cash and creating islands of make-believe prosperity amidst a sea of inequity and unfairness.

For every 1,000 employment opportunities generated for urban graduates as Wal-Mart salespersons, 15,000 poor people will go out of job as Indian cities will have no need of pheriwallas, subziwallahs, fruit-sellers, and local kirana shops. Instead of local seasonal produce from nearby villages finding their place in our kitchens and on our dining tables, we will have vegetables and foods that are mass-produced and mass-packaged, procured from captive farming where face-less multi-billion corporations will call the shots. To cap it all it will kill all indigenous produce and replace it with genetically modified crops.

India stands to lose yet another point of diversity.

Business magazines and newspaper columns are gung-ho about the prospects of a good shopping experience, now coming to aata, daal, cheeni, for consumers. What they don't realise is that these pleasant experiences will only be on surface and will hide behind the polite and slick veneer a relentless onslaught to capture markets and wipe out any competition that there is.

There have been protests in Ranchi recently where Reliance stores were attacked by irate people who stand to lose out on their livelihood because of big retail chains controlling all consumer experience in our cities. It is not just about employment opportunities being lost or gained, corporate retailing is about control over resources going from a decentralized source to a highly corporatised and monopolized one. It will be a dangerous situations for Indian consumers when a few men (and women) will have control over the supply chain to Indian cities with tens of millions of consumers. A 'buy-one-get-one-free' offer now may turn into exorbitant prices once competition is thrown out of the window and once corporates are well-entrenched into a retail sector. Instead of there being diversity and variety, the retail market will be a TATA versus Reliance battleground.

It is true that corporate crimes are far worse and insidious than small-time overpricing that retailers indulge in. A chain of supermarkets will not just have immediate environmental impact on the electricity scenario and underground water table of the city it operates in, it will also mean devastation of community life, setting up sweatshops, illegal labour, labelling violations and food safety problems, somewhere else in the country or in some other country. There is an unseen destruction of sustainable life patterns that takes place when monolithic corporate entities operate and sooner or later the strain of it shows on the very same consumer who gets the benefit of lower prices from the retail supermarket. When poor people lose their jobs, it is the taxpayers who subsidise the government social security initiatives to provide succor to those rendered workless.

Corporate retailers realize the damage their operations cause, and that is why one sees a huge investment in public-relations exercises and corporate social responsibility hogwash. A few million rupees are spent on covering up corporate crimes through advertising campaigns.

Wal Mart had net sales of 344,992 million dollars in 2006 . One can only imagine what tremendous cost this kind of business must have exerted on consumers, on the environment and communities affected, all around the world.

(Roopa Vajpeyi)

