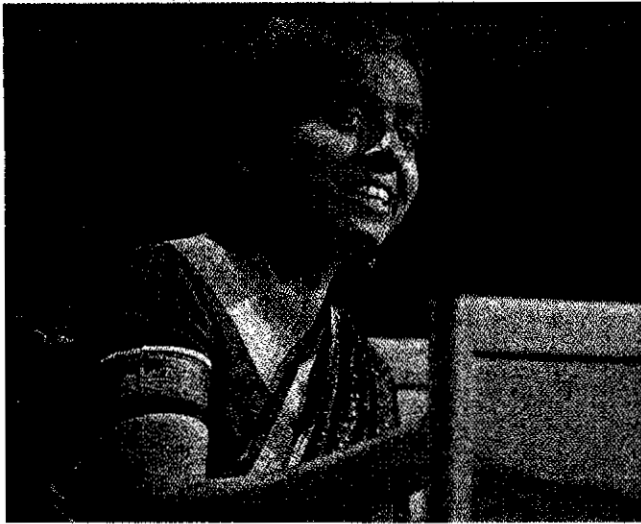


Sunita Narain, an Indian environmentalist, has dented two of the world's glossiest brands



NOT much renders Sunita Narain speechless. But watching television on August 22nd and hearing India's health minister, Anbumani Ramadoss, describe her to parliament as a "good friend", she was for a moment lost for words. Mr Ramadoss was in the process of (ever so politely) rubbishing a controversial piece of work by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), Ms Narain's research and lobbying group, based in Delhi. On August 2nd CSE had reported that its laboratory had tested soft drinks made by Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, bought in various parts of India, and found them to contain pesticide residues far above limits recommended by the government's Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS). Mr Ramadoss was, in effect, backing the cola giants in their rebuttal of CSE's claims.

For some foreign firms the controversy illustrates much that is troublesome about doing business in India's argumentative democracy. On this view, CSE, a small, 100-strong outfit led by the articulate and charismatic Ms Narain, wields a disproportionate influence. It is able to do so by tapping the deep vein of Indian suspicion of globalisation in general and of big multinationals in particular. What better exemplifies the evils of Coca-Colonisation, say protectionists, than cola itself? It is sweet, alluring and rather glamorous. But not only does it make you fat and rot your teeth—it turns out to be poisonous, too. There is even a Bollywood film, "Corporate", inspired by CSE's cola battles.

Ms Narain, however, is adamant that CSE is not opposed to foreign investment, economic liberalisation or private entrepreneurship. Rather, her organisation's stress is on the need, as the economy opens up, "to strengthen oversight and the institutions that look after the public good". Its real target is neither Coca-Cola nor PepsiCo, but the government and its alleged failure to protect public health. CSE is "in permanent opposition". This provides it with powerful, if shifting, political allies. The credibility won by an impressive record of accuracy and probity has made both CSE and Ms Narain forces to be reckoned with, by government and multinationals alike.

Its latest soft-drinks report has led the governments of several Indian states to ban the sale of PepsiCo's and Coca-Cola's products in schools and government offices. One state, Kerala, has introduced total prohibition, which the companies have chal-

lenged in the courts. The bans prompted Franklin Lavin, a senior American trade official, to weigh in, lamenting this "setback" for the Indian economy. "At a time when India is working hard to attract and retain foreign investment," he noted, "it would be unfortunate if the discussions were dominated by those who did not want to treat foreign companies fairly."

The damage done to sales through government action, however, is less important than the bad publicity. Neither company will quantify the losses it has suffered. But both have mounted campaigns advertising the safety of their products. They say both that the CSE test results are wrong, and that, even if true, the levels of pesticide are negligible and of no danger at all to human health. They point out that rice, for example, is permitted to contain 34,180 times more pesticide residues than bottled water, which has, they say, similar levels to fizzy drinks. They insinuate ulterior motives behind CSE's campaign.

Ms Narain argues that some residues must be tolerated in food, since farmers use pesticides to grow crops. But for soft drinks, she says, there is no excuse for the presence of pesticides, since the technology exists to clean the water quite cheaply. An earlier CSE report in 2003 that found pesticide traces in the companies' products led to the establishment of a joint parliamentary committee to investigate. This found that there were indeed pesticides in the carbonated drinks, and directed the government to draw up standards.

The BIS has since done that, but the standards have not been implemented. PepsiCo argues that you can reliably test for residues in the water, sugar and concentrate that go into its drinks, but not in the drinks themselves. Yet, like Coca-Cola, which has produced reports from a British laboratory apparently contradicting CSE's findings, it would accept such "final-product standards" if "a robust enough process" were available. It was the BIS's failure to implement such standards—blamed by Ms Narain on the health ministry, under pressure from the cola firms—that prompted CSE to undertake its follow-up study.

Passionate rigour

In the 25 years since Ms Narain went to work as a volunteer with CSE's founder, Anil Agarwal, it has had successes that must make it the envy of other activist groups. Most famously, the group's campaign against air pollution in the 1990s was largely credited with the decision to use compressed natural gas as fuel in Delhi's buses, taxis and three-wheeled "autorickshaws". Normally, says Ms Narain, "the scale of the disaster overshadows the scale of the intervention." In this, however, CSE made a difference. She is just as proud, however, of the way the group has brought rainwater-harvesting to the centre of the debate about how to cope with India's worsening water shortage—an achievement that won CSE last year's Stockholm water prize.

Ms Narain joined CSE from high school, because she was drawn to Agarwal's vision of allying "the rigour of science to the passion of journalism", and inherited his mantle when he died in 2002. At the time, some doubted whether CSE could maintain its standing. But this week, even Coca-Cola came close to suing for peace, leaking a letter "respectfully" disagreeing with the CSE laboratory's findings, but asking for talks. CSE agreed—provided the agenda is confined to the implementation of the final-product standard. A non-scientist, Ms Narain is proud of having one useful journalistic habit: never being afraid to ask a stupid question. So far, at least, CSE has not given many stupid answers. ■