

## Book review

### Our Toxic World

#### A guide to hazardous substances in our everyday lives

*A project by:* Toxics Link; *Script by:* Aniruddha Sen Gupta;  
*Illustrations by:* Priya Kuriyan; *Price :* Rs 395; *Publisher:* Sage, New Delhi  
*Year of publication:* 2010

Reviewed by *Max Martin*, DPhil research scholar, University of Sussex, UK

Narrated in sequential artwork, comic book style, *Our Toxic World* is a graphic novel. It is all about how industrial, farm and household chemicals and waste lace air, water and soil in our cities with toxins. They destroy livelihoods, choke people. Set in Delhi, it also tells the parallel story of alternatives—people adopting cleaner, greener avenues. The subtitle— ‘A guide to hazardous substances in our everyday lives’—aptly describes the book.

Aniruddha Sen Gupta’s script shows sensitivity and understanding of the issues of waste and pollution – an evidence of his experience in social communication and exposure to environmental research. Priya Kuriyan’s illustration style is cinematic, perhaps showing her background in animation filmmaking. Her art takes you around Delhi. You can pan across the concrete skeletons that would get fleshed out as new flyovers and housing blocks, zoom in on some garbage heap underneath or take a long shot of a factory cluster dotted with smokestacks. This dynamism of images gives the publication its pace and appeal.

Much of the story unfolds in medium shots though, the kind you see in teleserials that tell the story of families. The cover shows a group portrait of the Sachdevas, the protagonists of the story, in a collage of images that depict their potentially toxic environment. It shows the ripped up innards of a computer, a heavy metal hazard; a dusty construction site; a strip of tablets; a can of pesticides juxtaposed against an apple and a lemon.

The head of the household, Mohanlal Sachdeva, is a compliance inspector of factories and boilers. A conscientious officer, he makes it tough for polluting factories to operate and pushes his point

hard with his bosses. His wife Rajeshwari Sachdeva is homemaker, a sensible woman who would not pontificate on pollution, but insist on washing all vegetables in cold water to remove pesticide traces. Their daughter Anamika is a high school student who suffers allergies on account of exposure to pollution and toxins. Their son Prasad is a budding architect with a green taste.

Inside, as the story of the Sachdevas and their friends and neighbours unfold in pullouts, asides and boxes, the authors quietly slips in the message. The story is based on research done by Toxics Link, a New Delhi NGO that specializes in issues concerning waste and hazardous substances. You get to learn about persistent organic pollutants, the history of environmental legislation in India, the pollution quotient of different fuels and plastics and much more.

The characters of the story include Bindu, the maid at the Sachdeva household, whose husband has got lung disease due to all the dust particles inhaled from the construction sites where he worked. Shankar is a rag-picker, who earns a living from segregating, recycling, and selling waste. Imtiaz Sheikh is an autorickshaw driver and his uncle Altaf Mohammad is a farmer in Uttar Pradesh. Madhavi Kulkarni, a friend of Pramod, is an environmental activist who fulfils the need for *gyan* in such a publication.

They are all linked through the ecosystem, so to say. For instance, Mohammad sprays his fields with one of the dirty dozen pesticides called Dieldrin. It is a persistent organic pollutant that does not easily break down and its effects linger on in the environment. It enters the food chain

through vegetables, water and fish and is linked to immune system damage and other disorders. The story says Anamika feels tired, sick, and unhappy very frequently as her immune system has been damaged. Her mother had injected Dieldrin through her food while expecting Anamika.

Through such links and twists in the tale the scriptwriter skillfully tells us while technology transforms the way we live, work, and communicate, it leaves behind a stockpile of obsolete gadgets and waste. Issues such as electronic waste, burden of plastics, incineration, proliferation of private vehicles and the all-pervasive pollution are addressed in the story. So are alternatives like waste and water recycling and the green construction. The style is engaging, simple and matter-of-fact. However for the story's sake a fair bit of drama has been thrown in.

The publication stays clear of the hyperbolic style of activist NGO books and the hardboiled nature of academic work. Still at time you find tenuous – but still possible – links between environmental pollution and human health depicted in terms of certainty. Scientists might frown upon drawing such on-to-one links. In real life it is often hard to pinpoint what exactly has caused a disorder. Authors exercise a certain degree of creative freedom. Perhaps it is hard to depict nuances in a comic book format.

The book works as a direct and easy entry point to environmental education. It is appealing to children and adults. And it is useful also for those who are knowledgeable about these issues for its simple style that can help them communicate better.

Graphic novels are being increasingly considered an integral part of popular culture and mass education, taking the genre to academic libraries. They have dealt with subjects ranging from childhood memories and space travel to the Holocaust. Several leading illustrators and cartoonists, including in India, have produced graphic novels. Orijit Sen's 1994 graphic novel, 'River of Stories', depicting the central Indian adivasi culture threatened by dams over the Narmada is a fine example. It is often seen as a defining break from *Amar Chitra Katha* and DC comics that depict heroes from history, myths and pop fiction. There were several other similar educational publications, before and after, dealing with the environment.

While illustration reaches the level of fine art in several language publications in India, and cartoons and comic strips gain popularity, their effective use in education and awareness generation has yet to gain currency. *Toxics Link* should be commended for making their research findings easily accessible in an engaging manner; and the creative team for helping them do it so beautifully.

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*Note about the author*

Max Martin is a journalist pursuing DPhil research on climate, environment and migration at the University of Sussex, UK.