

Geetanjali Krishna: Wasteful about waste

PEOPLE LIKE THEM

Geetanjali Krishna / New Delhi October 13, 2007

The other day, I took my children to Deer Park, a wooded park close to our house. En route, we came across a huge garbage dump, festering with peels, plastic and poop. I said (rather unctuously, come to think of it), "if the municipal authorities did their job, this mess won't have been here!" My son asked innocently where all that stinky stuff had come from. Then the realisation hit me — the dump was full of waste from homes of people like us. Why was it that I bought CFL bulbs to conserve electricity, repaired dripping taps to conserve water — but did nothing to reduce the amount of waste emerging from my home?

Here are the statistics I unearthed: Indian cities with a population of over 100,000 generate between 52,000 tonnes and 85,000 tonnes of garbage daily. Although almost 35 per cent of this is compostable, it mostly goes to regular unsegregated dumps. However, a family of four generates only up to two kilos of organic waste daily. I'd imagine most of us won't have a problem taking charge of such a puny amount of waste.

A couple of days later, I came across the website of a Bangalore-based product designer Poonam Bir Kasturi, who's come up with a simple and hygienic answer to some of the questions that continued to plague me long after we returned from the park that day. She's devised these terracotta pots in which people can compost their own kitchen waste. "Actually, when I designed these pots, I really had no intention to create 'products' — I was just thinking that the government's strategy of segregating waste has hardly been effective," said Kasturi, a National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad alumna and founding member of Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore. Waste disposal, she believes, is soon going to become such a serious issue that more and more people will have to get into composting in a big way. She herself composts not just her own household waste, but also her neighbours'.

Kasturi's composting pots are small enough to fit even apartment balconies, and come in different sizes to accommodate waste generated by households of different sizes. "The process of composting takes about two to four months depending on the amount of waste," Kasturi explained, "and may be used over and over again." The smallest size, called gamla, has a lidded pot that takes a day's organic waste from a two-person household, placed inside a larger pot in which plants may be grown. This self-fertilising pot costs just Rs 100. Other pots take higher volumes, but are just as fetching. The best thing is that they don't stink, nor do they attract any of the flies one associates with open dumps. "All one need to do is to stir the mixture every three days for aeration," she said. Her designs have earned her the distinction of being the first Indian nominee for the global INDEX awards, given to innovative products that improve the quality of life.

Inspired, I asked where I could buy my composting pots in Delhi. "The idea when I began making these pots was also to benefit local potters. So, I tell everyone who doesn't live in Bangalore but is interested in these pots to get local potters to 'clone' my design free of cost wherever they are, and market it," she said. It's a nice little side business for eco-conscious entrepreneurs and people from as far as Allahabad are already doing it.

As for me, till such time as someone in Delhi doesn't start making these pots, I'm going to be glaring beady-eyed at my dustbins to make sure we aren't any more wasteful than we need to be about what we put in them.