



Messing with kitchen waste!

Bengaluru's Poonam Bir Kasturi, a former student of the National Institute of Design, has one obsession: that of managing kitchen waste. She is the brain behind Daily Dump, that turns our daily garbage into nutrient waste. Since waste management is not "sexy enough" for most people, she has designed attractive and innovative terracotta pots in which the waste can be managed. Sukanya Srinivas on the woman behind the innovation that proves each one of us can make a difference

Photographs: Dr M Vivek

As I walk into a leafy lane in Indiranagar, I notice the interesting leaf litter containers secured to trees all along the lane. I open the gate and feel like I am in Aladdin's land of urns. The garden has terracotta pots of all sizes, painted in pretty colours, sitting cheek to cheek, begging to be opened! I open one and pick up a handful of moist, black compost and cannot help breathing in the damp and earthy smell that

transports me directly to deep, mysterious, magical forests. The origin of this "black gold" is our humble, smelly kitchen waste, at which we screw up our noses. And the woman responsible for making organic kitchen waste not so yucky after all, emerges from behind the pots, bringing with her an energy and effervescence that instantly envelop you.

Poonam Bir Kasturi may look petite but packs a punch when it comes to her passion for making composting a friendly word in

cosmopolitan Bengaluru. An industrial designer from NID (National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad), Founding Director of IndusTree Crafts, Founding Faculty of Srihti School of Design, Founder of Playnspeak - whew, you wonder what she is doing messing around with kitchen waste! Well, her favourite baby, Daily Dump, has got a lot of people sitting up to take notice of what they can and must do with their kitchen waste.

Daily Dump, which started in April 2006, is a product-service driven system that helps households manage their organic waste by converting it into nutrient rich compost. What started off as a classroom discussion with her students in Srihti in 2005 on sustainability and managing waste, transformed into the reality of Daily Dump. Her vision is to reduce the burden on the rather tardy public waste management system by ensuring that kitchen waste is not sent out - seemingly simple yet

having far reaching consequences.

In just five years the Daily Dump team has helped over 4,500 customers in Bengaluru to compost household waste in terracotta pots, and these customers keep around 5,522 kg of organic waste out of landfills everyday. What is remarkable about Poonam's waste management process is its simplicity, and the cleverly designed terracotta pots add a touch of earthiness to it.

She says, "Design used well will help you see whole systems." Elaborating on this philosophy, she adds, "I needed to create something so simple and unthreatening and so completely straight that we wouldn't face resistance. The minute you say it is not intimidating, everyone is invited to the party, you create a different space for a

conversation to happen," Sustainability is a key concept and if people can manage their own waste without

much ado, then mindsets can change and the movement can gather a pace on its own. "Composting is a natural process. It has been perfected by the universe and natural systems in a profoundly evolutionary way," she emphasizes with passion.

With her forays into the industrial and craft sectors, designing products for the home and her involvement with Srishti School of Design, I am curious to find out why she decided to focus on the composting business. She says, "As designers, we are trained to look at insights, not markets. I started observing the mindset of how people consume. Waste is not considered sexy enough for most of us in India. I wanted to become a one-stop shop for a specific aspect of waste management. And I did this by watching people's consumption patterns and behaviour. Daily Dump is an endeavour where I am experimenting with how design plays out in ways that perhaps were not really explored before." She adds that her project

is tentative and she has no idea where it will eventually lead to, but what she is sure of is that if there has to be a change in behaviour then the aim should be

system when they saw the segregated waste getting mixed up in the truck that transported waste to the landfills. It then made a lot of sense to get people into



Poonam with her husband Anand Kasturi

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to focus on making things more accessible, do-able and non-threatening. And that is exactly what she has achieved in the past five years.

The effect of her small but sure movement can become far-reaching if the number of people buying into the concept goes up consequentially. Bengaluru produces a mind-boggling figure of 3,500 to 4,000 tons of waste EVERY DAY! The centralized government composting plant can handle only 500 tons per day. The rest reaches dumps that are illegal. About 50-70 per cent of the waste generated in the average Indian urban home is organic wet waste. The Bengaluru of yesteryears had large, gracious homes with gardens and many people composted in pits in their backyards. Now, the waste is thrown into a pile at the end of the road. Though the government introduced the collection of segregated waste (under the Swacha Bangalore campaign) a few years back, citizens were disillusioned with the

managing their own waste, to make them self-driven composters. not motivated by any extrinsic reward – to make it a cool activity rather than a cumbersome chore.

So how exactly does this system work? It starts with three steps – knowing your waste (is it biodegradable, non-biodegradable or hazardous), segregation of waste (keeping organic/ biodegradable waste separate from other waste), throwing the organic kitchen waste into the composter along with some dried leaves. One can add an accelerator to speed up the process, which is basically an aerobic decomposition method of composting. The entire journey from kitchen waste to compost takes about 60-90 days. The range of composters are ingeniously designed by Poonam, keeping in mind the smaller home spaces and ease of operation. The products comprise the three-tiered Kambha (terracotta range for individual houses), the Manthan (plastic drums that can handle organic waste from 12-15 homes),

SHE HAS TWO MORE innovative programmes in her bag called Trash Trail and Bugs Story. Trash Trail aims to sensitize citizens about the journey of the ubiquitous black garbage bag from one's home to the landfill. Poonam believes that if people get a first-hand experience of the various stages involved in waste management and the enormous efforts that are involved, they would be more inclined to think about the waste that they are generating and ways to reduce it



the Leaf Composter (for streets and landscape areas), and the Leave-it pot (for curing the compost).

The Manthan is a collaborative effort with a Sintex tank manufacturing unit in Aurangabad. The terracotta pots are made with potters in Palamnet, giving them sustainable livelihood opportunities. The costs are reasonable and range between Rs 1,000 and Rs 1,500 for the terracotta pots and Rs 10,000-25,000 for the Manthan. For those who find the prospect of handling their kitchen waste daunting, Poonam offers a range of service options from weekly to monthly to even crisis visits!

Poonam is very generous about sharing her business model and prototypes without charging any kind of franchise fee. It is refreshing to see an open source model of knowledge dissemination in today's world of patents. Daily Dump has 15 'clones' around India and abroad that are sharing the model for waste management.

"I am happy that others use the model as it helps create the change I want," she affirms.

"Knowledge should be shared. I am concerned about the earth's ecology, but it does not belong to me. Equal distribution of knowledge and wealth is very important." She credits her parents for the desire to think about "something more than myself". "I grew up in a warm, loving and liberal home. There was a fundamental respect for excellence, and personal integrity was something very intrinsic. There was also a certain resilience that my siblings and I imbibed from my parents and that has stood us in good stead in our lives." Her thoughts on knowledge sharing, which she says is an essential part of Indian culture, had been a part of her life from childhood. She is also very grateful for the roles played by her husband and son in supporting her in all her ventures. She cherishes and is grateful for the freedom that she has in pursuing her passion in life.

The livelihoods of the unorganized sector are next on the agenda for her and this programme is aptly named Recycle Guru! The mission here is to build



capacity and dignity for this sector. She is actively working with the informal recycling sector – those dealing with plastics, bottles, etc. – and feels that it makes sense to use the existing systems in this informal sector and empower them rather than have the bigger players coming in and taking their livelihood away.

"While systems are important, sometimes we have to cut through the fluff to get to the core issue! Why are we not seeing the existing machinery that we already have and create a better livelihood for them?" she asks passionately.

She feels that the NGOs who are working with solid waste management are creating parallel systems involving big players rather than recognizing the core competence of the huge informal sector that is already at work in



Aesthetic recycling: Poonam with the terracotta pots

India. She talks about one of the local recyclers that she is working with right now, who is uneducated but confident, smart and enthusiastic. Suresh is just 20 years old, has an alcoholic father, has risen above all this with determination and even has a Facebook account! She says that some of the insights that he comes up with are amazing. This, according to her, is the native intelligence of the real India, which sadly lies untapped.

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involved in waste management and the enormous efforts that are involved, they would be more inclined to think about the waste that they are generating and ways to reduce it. Every month ten people are taken on this daylong trip and those who have participated in it say that it is a life-changing experience! Bugs Story on the other hand is aimed at children below 12 years and the idea is to change the attitude of children to bugs. Through storytelling and tactile activity based sessions, it shows children how junk from the dustbin goes on to become useful compost and the important role of bugs in this process.

Poonam's journey has not been easy as she has been battling with lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease for which she has already

been through six cycles of chemotherapy and is on steroids. On the days that she is battling the lupus flares, she says it gets her down so badly that she wonders if she will ever feel normal again. Family support and her passion for waste are what keep her going. Despite all the hurdles, her enthusiasm has not flagged and she is back on the road again, a road filled with possibilities for a better world...

As I leave her potting around in the garden with her composters, I cannot help thinking of Helen Keller's quote – "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."