We, as women, innovate every day. As we multi-task our way through the world, the only way to stay in the game is by discovering smarter ways to do everything. Imagine, if one day inspiration struck and you had a brilliant brainwave. Imagine it transformed your community or saved lives or created a vision for the future. Our campaign celebrates such incredible ideas and the women behind them. We bring you their inspiring stories in every issue and get them to tell us how they hit upon their Big Idea. By training the spotlight on such women, we hope you are encouraged to follow your own moments of discovery. And if you believe you already have a Big Idea or know of someone who has, write to us at femina@wwm.co.in with 'What's the big idea' in the subject line. Happy inventing!

PUT YOUR GARBAGE TO WORK

A stack of three terracotta pots and an idea—that's all Poonam Kasturi Bir uses to turn daily organic waste into rich compost for potted plants. Madhuri Velegar K finds out how you can do it in your home, for Rs 800

As one of the founders of Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore, Poonam Kasturi Bir has always been teaching her students to use design in fun yet practical ways to make sense of the world. But after teaching at Srishti for 12 years, Poonam, a National Institute of Design alumnus, decided it was time to move on. "I asked myself, 'Do I make money or make sense?' Then I looked at a common problem—waste disposal. It's not glamorous, so we don't discuss it. That's why I decided to talk about it. I wanted to offer a non-fussy and fun method to deal with waste."

The ticking problem...
"Have you ever been to a landfill site? Big Indian cities generate roughly...

Poonam's invention, the Khamba, is available on www.dailydump.org
3,000 tonnes of waste per day," says Poonam. Plastic, metal, milk covers, foil, broken bulbs are all dumped into ever-growing landfills, but a large portion of the waste that is dumped is organic and bio-degradable and therefore, essentially non-polluting. "I thought it was just wrong to dump bio-degradable waste with broken tubelights, batteries, plastic and medicines that pollute ground water, soil and the air," explains Poonam. "For example, if you mix plastic, papaya and a broken tubelight, after some months, it releases methane gas into the air, which is deadly and can cause global warming."

Disturbed by the state of affairs, Poonam met a Karnataka state government representative to ask him where the budget on waste management was being spent. He shocked her by saying that there was no budget for it. Poonam made up her mind. "I thought it was time to take ownership for what we were doing, even in the smallest way. An urban family of four generates anything from 750 g to 1.5 kg of organic waste every day and if every household decides to compost at home, our total waste would be a lot more manageable."

...and an idea played out

Poonam came up with the plan for a composter. The essential idea behind the composting process is to dump all your organic kitchen waste like watermelon peels, egg shells and stalks into a compost pit in the backyard and cover it, so that it turns into nutritious garden compost in time. But backyards are hard to find in cities and most of us can't fit this back-breaking task into our hectic lives, even if we are lucky enough to have a garden.

So Poonam created an easy solution. "I wanted to design an attractive home composter that could be used by everybody," explains Poonam. "Two years went into designing a suitable prototype. We went to potters to execute the final design, which involved creating colourful terracotta pots with holes on the side that could be stacked on top of each other. We call it the Khamba and you can order it over the Net at www.dailydump.org. We also make house-visits to give demos on how it works. The only 'work' involved in using this composter is stirring the pot once in two to three days, so that the mix gets some oxygen to compost." The composter and the stirring tools cost Rs 800.

AS OF FEB 2010, 3,738 KG OF WASTE HAS BEEN KEPT OUT OF LANDFILLS, THANKS TO THE KHAMBA.

It's a hit

Poonam finds her most enthusiastic followers in schools where youngsters are kicked about the power of composting. She has also released two series of books to help them understand the need for composting.

"Also, as of February 2010, 3,738.35 kg of organic waste is being kept out of landfills every day by customers who use my home composter and covert it into nutritious manure," says Poonam. "It's been four years since we began dailydump.org, we have clones in two cities, and have shared our drawings with 58 countries who would like to follow our model."