

GOOD EARTH

What a waste!

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Though recycling has been a tradition in India, few of us realise the work that goes into recycling the waste and the struggles the waste pickers have to face.



WASTE MATTERS: Segregate the garbage so that it can be recycled.

Do you know what happened to that plastic bottle that you threw away this morning? Or the tetra pack, or the broken CDs or the old batteries? It's quite likely that you don't! We pay such little attention to the things we throw away in our wastebasket everyday but fortunately for some — "Waste Matters"! This is the name of a group in Pune that supports nearly 6000 waste pickers who are involved in collecting and segregating household waste for recycling.

Most of us know that recycling has been a tradition in India. But few of us realise the work that goes into recycling our waste and the kinds of struggles that the waste pickers have to face. Each morning, a group of women visit an allocated locality and go from door to door collecting all recyclable waste.

Lives they lead

Ideally, urban citizens should be responsible for segregating wet and dry waste but often it falls upon women to do this. After a couple of hours of collection, the women then spend time segregating the waste into several categories.

Paper is categorised into good white paper, newspaper and crumpled paper. Plastic bags get divided according to their density - below 20 microns cannot be recycled, above 20 microns can. Broken glass goes back to a glass factory.

Similarly several other materials — hard plastic, oil bottles, metals of different kinds, tetra pack get categorised and sent to various different industries to be reintegrated. Did you know that even the metal filament in bulbs could be recycled?

For all this work, the waste pickers charge a meagre Rs 20/- per month per household. The segregated waste is then redistributed to retailers who have fixed rates for each category.

On an average, a waste picker could make around Rs. 1,500 from households and Rs 15 a day from selling scrap.

I have been watching and interacting with the women who come to my home regularly and am intrigued by the lives they lead. Recently, I had an experience that convinced me of the honesty and integrity of these women who earn so little. I threw one of my gold earrings out into the garbage one morning. By the time I realised what I had done it was too late as the trash had been collected and the earring was probably drowned under tonnes of garbage.

Even so, I made an effort to look for it and word passed around quickly among the group of women who work in our area. The tempo driver finally took the message to the two women, who had by then taken away my garbage to start the segregation. That afternoon, I found them at my doorstep, grinning, with my earring in their hand!

They had spent the entire morning looking for it. They returned it with a sense of pride and dignity and I humbly realised that I needed to be more vigilant about the waste I create!

What can I do

1. Make it a habit to segregate your garbage. All recyclables should be sold to a raddi walla or a waste picker.
2. Learn how to compost your wet garbage. This can be used to make valuable fertilizer for potted plants or your garden.
3. Try to reduce your non-recyclable waste as much as you can. This includes items like batteries, thermocol, tyre tubes etc.
4. Think creatively of ways of reusing things _ only throw away something when you just cannot find a use for it.

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group