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Letting worms take the lead

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Standing beside one of the hostel buildings of Stella Maris College is a quaint little hut-like structure. From a distance, one is easily impressed by its green roofs, mud brown walls and what looks like bright colourful designs painted on them. Stepping a little closer one realises that the designs are actually happy little chubby worms — some have spades, some are working on round bubbles with the letter 'P' within them, some are reading from a book and others are standing on a mound and giving a thumbs up!

Your curiosity will soon get the better of you and before you know you it, you're taking a peak into the little play house, only to find out that it's actually a waste processing unit!

The vermi-composting unit, a waste composting unit where the processing is done by earthworms, was set up in the college two years ago. Today, this little unit not only adds to the scenic element in the college, but processes upto 60 kilograms of organic waste from the canteens and hostels every month. All of this comes out as fine dry tea powder-like compost which is sold at the canteen at `60 a kg. Every month the unit produces 30 kgs of compost, rich

in nitrates and phosphates. “The compost now has a huge demand. Most of it is bought by students and faculty within the college itself. The advantage of vermi-compost is that it is more nutritious than other forms like microbial compost,” says Dr Rita Jayaraj, assistant professor at the department of Zoology in the college.

Segregation at the source is the key for the unit. All the waste from the canteen kitchens are systematically brought to the unit in trolleys, mixed with cow dung and allowed to process. Keeping predators of the earthworms like frogs and lizards at bay is often important, as well as turning over the waste once in a month or so.

“It actually has a capacity of 100 kgs. But we only get vegetable waste for that amount,” says Alexander J who is in-charge of the unit. Over the years, Alexander has been experimenting with composting. Now, instead of cow dung which is used with the waste, he uses curd.

Ask him how difficult is it to handle waste every day and his answer surprises us. “It is very satisfying. Even though it is waste, there is nothing hazardous about it. There is no harmful smell or other problems when you handle it and once you start doing it you will be able to discover newer techniques,” he explains.

The unit is now a source of pride for many. In fact, according to sources, the unit is of special interest even for college inspection.