

Say yes to plastic!

Students of Stella Maris College and Loyola College worked to spread the message about plastic waste collection.

They say too many cooks spoil the broth. But there we were 18 young women, putting our heads together thinking about the one thing that affects us all every day. Despite rapid development and multi-fold growth, bad roads and garbage everywhere are favourite complaints. After never-ending discussions, disagreement, phone calls and e-mails, the final year students of MA Public Relations came up with "Plastic Salai", a campaign in association with the Corporation of Chennai, to use PR tools to reach out to people in and around our college to encourage them to separate plastics at source.



Steady path

The Corporation of Chennai has decided to lay roads in Chennai with a compound of bitumen and plastic and has to buy plastic for this purpose. However, this plastic can easily be generated from the public. Any plastic under 60 microns is usable. Look at it this way: If you can effortlessly crunch it up with your hands, it can be used for laying roads. This includes biscuit and chips packets, milk packets, any kind of plastic packaging material, plastic cups, carry bags... Plastic roads are eco-friendly, last up to three times longer, are resistant to water and reduce stress on bitumen resources. They are a brilliant solution to the menace of non-recyclable thin plastics, and also serve the urgent requirement of good roads.

The Plastic Salai team has created posters, stickers, banners, videos and a song to spread the message of collaborative work between the citizens and the civic authorities. If the rest of the

world can separate waste at source, why can't we? The Plastic Salai team conducts programmes in schools explaining the process and how they can help.

We have placed bins in these schools and are overjoyed at the positive response. We have done presentations, skits and interactive sessions asking people to be part of the 'WoW' factor (Waste on Wednesdays); the Corporation will pick up the plastic from collection points on Wednesdays. We will take this campaign to colleges and business organisations too in our ward. We hosted a rally on the Marina Beach on March 11 encouraging people to help 'Road Podu'.

Lessons

Having said that, we've learnt an important lesson from the civic authorities: Development is not possible without the active participation of every citizen. The authorities do not function

independently of the society, they only build on it. It doesn't take much: just consistent reminders of the message and inculcating the habit of waste segregation at source. This could be in homes, schools, or workplaces. Corporates also have a significant role to play and need to set the ball rolling by playing a determined role in waste management.

We have learnt lessons for life while planning and executing this campaign. A whole lot of team work and patience combined with excitement, sleepless nights, non-stop text messages and Facebook chats have brought us to a point from where there's no looking back. Learning has never been more hands on, more fun and more valuable. This campaign is something we are all going to cherish for life.

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When the Corporation of Chennai came out with its need to collect 800 tonnes of plastic to lay roads for a stretch of 370km, it did not float a tender to get shredded plastic from companies. Instead it turned to Chennai residents to collect waste plastic from their households. It was a win-win situation, as this also served as a means to dispose of plastic. We, the students of Loyola, took stock of the situation and decided to contribute our two cents worth.

Convincing citizens

As part of our Outreach activities, volunteers visited the suburbs of Egmore on Tuesdays and Fridays to create awareness among people on health and hygiene. When the plastics project came by, we decided to drop in on a Wednesday (the day earmarked by the Corporation to collect plastic) and collect plastics from the area.

We got in touch with the area's garbage collector so that he could organise transport. We marched out to the suburb, earning puzzled looks from the residents. Most residents were reluc-

tant to part with their plastic bags. We had to explain to them the need to do away with plastic and also how they can contribute to better roads in the city. And soon we got their confidence and garbage collection gained momentum. Volunteers went around homes and dumping areas to collect plastic bags. We still had to coax a few senior residents, who gave in finally when we retired for the day and dropped the plastic collected as the vehicle was moving out.

Carry your bags

It was a day well spent and made an impact on every individual who participated. For our part, we have decided to cut down on our use of plastic bags by carrying our own bags for shopping and refusing the offer of plastic bags in shops and other places.

The joke was, however, on us that day. Ironically, we had to use plastic gloves for the drive. And they went straight into the bin, once we were done.

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