

By AMITA KANEKAR



Menstruating without Oppressing Humans or Nature

Goa has become a garbage dump. Old-timers find this more appalling than others, for they remember a pre-1961 Goa which frowned upon public littering, spitting, urinating, and defecation. But changing attitudes is just one part of the problem. The other is today's culture of disposables, especially single-use plastic. And the fact that, although more than 98% of Goa's garbage is compostable or recyclable - according to vRecycle, the Salcete-based waste management company - this doesn't get done, for which the blame lies both with the public and the government. As for the remaining 2%, a big part of which is gel-based personal hygiene products like sanitary napkins and diapers, which cannot be disposed of safely, the only way out is stop usage.

But who's listening? It is the better-off section of society who produce the most garbage, including expensive and unsustainable hygiene products, but take no responsibility for it. In the civilised world, everyone is expected to segregate their own garbage and deposit it at designated community dumpsters. But caste society is different. Here, we privileged folks get our waste collected from our doorstep and, that too, by municipal staffers who wear no protective gear and use their bare hands. In the civilised world, sanitation workers look like astronauts, for they are protected from head to toe, and use machines for picking up dirt. Here it's the opposite, for cleaning is considered the 'lowest' of occupations by caste society. Swachh Bharat can come and go, but these horrible working conditions cause no comment - for they are an Indian tradition. And the cleaners can never keep up with the dirty-ers, for the latter think it their birthright to foul the public domain. It is, for example, quite normal to find them flouting garbage segregation rules, without facing any penalty.

With the problem reaching horrendous, environment-destroying, and tourism-threatening proportions, the authorities have been forced to wake up. It's interesting, though, how they seem unable to deal sustainably with even biodegradable waste. Can't it be made a rule for householders to compost their own wet waste? Why must it be collected door-to-door and then transported by truck to mammoth dumping sites or composting centres, or expensive waste treatment plants like the 140-crore Saligao one, wasting public money and creating health and environmental hazards in those localities? Instead, can't small neighbourhood compost centres be set up, perhaps in a corner of every municipal garden? The privately-built

and -run Saligao plant was actually strongly opposed by locals who fought for a small scale system of segregation at source and local treatment of biodegradable waste, but the authorities were determined to invest in a big project. And now, with no sign of the garbage problem getting solved, they are planning 3 more waste treatment plants on the Saligao model.

Non-biodegradable waste is a much bigger disaster. The CM has been promising a plastic-free and zero-waste Goa for a while, but, like everything Parrikar says, that doesn't mean much. Even his promise that Goa would be plastic-bag-free from May 2018 has turned out hollow, with only below-50-micron-thick plastic bags being banned. Plastic-free may similarly turn out to be as limited and selective, as with the current Maharashtra ban, which has mainly targeted small retailers and their customers, while corporate 'pre-packaging' of the same products gets a free ride and thus also a market boost.

Not surprisingly, the Recycling Station of the Panjim Corporation (CCP) at St. Inez, one of the centres where the city's dry garbage is sorted for recycling, is a depressing place, for staff as well as visitors. It comprises crude sheds where the staff sort - again, with hardly any protective gear - dirty bags, bottles, wrappers, and worse. The place simply overflows with heaps of dirty plastic bags of waste. There is no paving on the roads in the complex—or, rather, no roads at all—just muddy slush littered with burst-open bags of waste. Would CCP office-bearers like to work from here for a day? We think not. The whole place stinks - not just literally but also metaphorically. It reeks of complete disregard for the staff and their life-supporting and disease-fighting contribution to the city.

Among the disgusting waste items that staffers have to sort are used personal hygiene products; these are then taken away, apparently to be finally burnt or dumped in landfills. But these super-convenient (for users) gel-based disposables are not just a human rights disaster, but also an environmental one, for they take more than 500 years to decompose, and produce toxic pollution when burnt. And the use of such products is growing, with vRecycle collecting 7 tonnes of them in 2 years, just from their 10,000 village households.

Are there no options? Of course there are. And not just the re-usable menstrual cup which is

expensive and relatively difficult to use. Goa is also home to Jayashree Parwar, of Teeratan Enterprises, Pilgao, Bicholim, who made news in the Indian media last year for her eco-friendly Sakhi sanitary napkins, and was felicitated for her enterprise at Yugnayak's Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations this year in Panjim. Based on a design from Tamil Nadu, her napkins are made from 'pinewood paper, silicon paper, butter paper, nonwoven paper, and cotton', and degrade completely in just 2 months after being buried in soil. A pack of 8 napkins is available for Rs 32, and her plant can produce 100 packs in a day.

They sell everything they produce, Parwar says, despite doing no advertisements and the fact that retail shops refuse to stock their napkins; the shops prefer the corporate products advertised on television. So Parwar sells online (on Amazon) and through word-of-mouth, which, amazingly, has worked fine, with bulk orders coming from as far as Rajasthan. Goa, however, does not buy very much.

Can't the government intervene here? Can't unsustainable gel-based products be banned? Can't widespread advertisement be done about these eco-friendly and cheap alternatives, and can't they be started for diapers too? And surely they can be segregated from other garbage by users, and disposed by them as well in neighbourhood disposal sites?

None of this is actually difficult. All it requires is public awareness and government will. But it would mean our ministers giving up their love for spending big bucks, and getting serious about saving Goa's environment and also about improving the work conditions of Goa's waste workers. Which - given their pet projects, from RP21 to the decreased CRZ, and the fact that manual scavenging still continues in Goa despite being banned - doesn't look very likely.

(With thanks to Jayashree Parwar and Clinton Vaz.)

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