

Hyderabad the pioneer

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Many of us who have given eco-friendly a try, many a time, do not understand what to do with the kitchen waste or the plastic that enters our households.

But Hyderabad-based Padmini Rangarajan, an educational puppeteer, is trying to educate people on waste management, reducing plastic usage, and choosing an eco-friendly living. She is also known for making incense cones out of kitchen waste, now imagine that!

She engages in all kinds of storytelling for children. Most of them being awareness building about our environment, nature, and mother earth.

The Pioneer catches up with this stellar storyteller to know further about her mission, projects, and more.

The idea of practicing whatever she preaches through her storytelling as a puppeteer struck her after a young girl questioned her the same.

"There is a small story behind this. In, 2014-2015, during one of the puppet play on World Environment Day, I was narrating a story about plastic waste and other wastes and how we're abusing mother earth. After the show, a child stood up and asked me — my puppet — 'are you practising all that you want us to practice to protect the earth?' This was a direct slap to me, not to my puppets. Though I was conscious of this, I had not made any significant change, except that I was using cloth bags. But the child's words kept ringing in my ears. I started to follow some people who were working in waste management missions. My exploration and search are still on. Though I was re-using most of the plastic bottles and boxes to train teachers, to make the best-out-of-waste puppets, I felt I had to do something more. I started reading articles and came to know that 16% of domestic wastage contributes to landfills. This was triggering. That's when I began converting my kitchen waste into compost. Padmini shares about her journey to building a healthy atmosphere.

She further goes on to talk about a friend who introduced her to DIY solutions. "During my trip to Sri Lanka in 2016, I met a lovely friend who does multiple Do-It-Yourself things right from her kitchen — homemade kumkum, creams, and choop cones (incense cones). I took inspiration from her to utilise kitchen waste to make choop cones. I started drying flowers used for puja and powdering them. Slowly I



WASTE TO WEALTH



then started with fruit peels like lemon and orange. Now I'm making them with everyday vegetable peels right from onion, garlic, other fruits and vegetable peels, to dried curry, and mint leaves, and the stalk of coriander leaves. Not all the of vegetables do we peel off the skin, but for some vegetables, we cut their ends like bhindi (okra), Kunduru (dondakaya), and others. I dry them all."

Choop cones are another version of agarbatti making, but with the shape being conical. Most of the market-available agarbatti-incense sticks are chemical-based with the composition of charcoal and other chemicals used for ignition. Padmini avoids using chemicals in what she does and makes them using natural products along with sawdust

and coconut fibres that act as binding and igniting agents. For the aroma, she says she adds some essential oils, which are optional. Everything she does is purely handmade.

Apart from incense cones, Padmini also uses coconut shells to make puppets. "I recycle plastic water bottles/kind of plastic bottles, cardboard, thermocol that comes along with the packaging, cartons (these days too many from Amazon), multi-layered plastic wrappers — MIP that come with Marie gold biscuits/washing powder packets, etc., to make my puppets," says she.

When asked what inspired her to become a puppeteer, she says, "My son Anirudh is my inspiration behind taking up puppetry. He once participated

in a puppet show performance during his kindergarten, with his favourite *Mulla the Monkey and the Cap seller*, back in 2003. It was from there that my journey started. I have not been trained in puppetry, I learnt it all from trial and error. From time to time, I sought guidance from my father, T. Rangarajan, a theatre artist, and Vedic scholar."

With the idea of preserving, practicing, and promoting various art forms, Padmini practices puppetry, a culturally rich art, which encompasses all the art forms within it.

"Waste management awareness is still at an infancy stage in our country, not all are aware or sensitive about it. With regard to my puppet-making, I work on waste materials recycling and the use of paper mache to a great extent. My mission is to reduce domestic kitchen waste going into landfill and recycling it. In this journey, my immediate neighbours are my source of inspiration, apart from my own family. They too are very conscious of not throwing away kitchen waste, and help me in my activity. Our flower seller Vasantha, in fact, makes it a point to not throw away her unsold flowers.



She donates them to me. I make these cones and share them with my neighbours, maids, and flower sellers. They also told me that my cones act as anti-repellent mosquito coils! It has been very encouraging. I want to take this up as a commercial product by engaging self-help groups, and women's groups," she asserts.

She is now on a plastic recycling task among residential apartments which would be an income-generator for the association.

On a concluding note, Padmini, who is also the director of Spoothi Theatre for Educational Puppetry, Art & Craft-STEPARC, shares some tips to convert kitchen waste into something useful: "The best way is to segregate dry waste from wet waste. The second is to use the dry kitchen waste directly for the kitchen garden. Turn the remaining waste to make compost at home. It works out well when collectively done as a community work towards community development. Many today are into terrace and kitchen gardening, so this works as a good compost mixture. While making this compost, a kind of liquid is generated — *amrit jal*, it can be mixed with water and sprayed onto plants as it is rich in nutrients. This *jal* can be used once a week or once in a fortnight, it helps in lowering the chance of pest infestation. It is also an excellent foliar spray."