

Plastic-bag free suburb of Mumbai, Thakur village

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Why did we want plastic-bag free Thakur village?

It is not too long ago that we all got introduced to plastic carrier and shopping bags that made shopping a convenient affair without the tedium of carrying your own bags. We do not even have to plan for shopping. We land up in the market, pick up whatever we need (and otherwise) and have it all packed into a handy plastic carrier bag(s). As with all conveniences, this has also brought with it its own disadvantage, *pollution* by plastic bags. This may not be very obvious at first, but has repercussions for a long period of time (something akin to slow poisoning). Plastic is non-biodegradable and hence, not eco-friendly. One can burn it, but it emits toxic gases on combustion.

Since the government has banned the use of thin (below certain microns) plastic bags, many of us go to the market with the view that it is alright to use thick plastic bags, and also to reuse them. The question is, even though the thick bags could be used again, what happens after a few rounds of reuse? The bags get shabby, the printing comes off and they end up in our garbage bins.

Now if this is a real problem, then what is the solution?

This takes me back to the days of my childhood. I have memories of getting vegetables from the market in cloth bags, and coming back from the grocer's with paper bags. So why have we left those good habits? Is it just because of the convenience, or is it because we are unconcerned about the nature around us, or is it just because we do not stop to think about our actions? If any of these is true then this needs a rethink. We are all supposedly educated and trained to think. I am sure most of us want our surroundings to be clean, for ourselves and for our kids.

So here we are, taking control of the situation and piloting a practical solution rather than just talking about the problem or worrying about it. The residents of Viceroy Park, Thakur village, Kandivli (East), Mumbai along with INSEED, Nashik, decided to tackle the problem head-on, and make the housing society and surroundings free of plastic bags. We adopted a friendly and sociable way, with a simple plan:

1. Educate the people – this does not imply that people are not aware of the problem. We wanted people to know that we do have options. The need was to rethink the approach, and *be a part of the solution, and not of the problem.*
2. Make alternatives to plastic bags, such as paper and cloth bags, available to the community, when and where required. Keeping people's convenience in mind, our core strategy was to make the alternatives available at the point of source of plastic bags, e.g. local shops, vegetable vendors and sundry sellers.

What did we do?

We started our project in the month of December in 2009. We conducted a survey in Viceroy Park to see if the residents were willing to participate in the project to make the area free of plastic bags. It was expected that most were aware of the ill-effects of plastic bags, and it was really encouraging to see many people wanting to be a part of the project. Following the survey, many were enthusiastic about being active participants.

Workspace requirement:

The next question was about the space needed for regular meetings, discussions and storage of raw material and bags. On seeing the enthusiasm of the residents of Viceroy park, the housing society committee agreed to give a part of an under-utilised room in one of the buildings, on condition of keeping the place clean and presentable at all times. Now we not only stock the raw material but also store the paper and cloth bags in this room. We also meet every day in this room to work. During holidays and weekends, children also volunteer to make the bags and put the logo on them. They take immense pride in being contributors to this project.

Paper bags:

At the outset, we had a question as to who would be the manufacturers, suppliers of raw material and consumers. Who would make the paper bags, and who would use them? It was decided to involve women from economically disadvantaged sections of the suburb to make the bags out of newspapers.

To kick-start the project we appealed to the residents to donate one newspaper per week (a saleable item) to make paper bags. The response from the residents was tremendous, which was very encouraging. We then approached a few of the women from the slums around, who were willing to be trained to make the bags. The incentive was the extra income this would generate for their families.

The other important part of the project was the consumer. Would people carry paper bags to the shops? Most likely no! They would, though, take it willingly if the shops supplied it. Therefore we decided to approach the shopkeepers in our vicinity to vend supplies using our paper bags INSTEAD of plastic/polythene bags. First we approached the local chemists who were happy to participate in this project. The others like the andawallah and paanwallah (for a description of wallah and walli, follow this link: <http://www.cnngo.com/mumbai/play/streets-your-city-mumbais-pavement-purveyors-908254>) also agreed willingly. There were some that took time and energy to convince, but in the end most agreed to participate.

The paper bags were provided to the shops at a cost, though low, to cover the expenses of making it, and providing salaries to the women. It felt good to see that each day the number of bags purchased from us increased. The most memorable moment was when our friends from the locality mentioned that their purchases were wrapped in paper bags with the project logo on them. This amply demonstrated that the paper bags were well-received and well-appreciated by many in the community.

Cloth bags (or bags for life): As the usage of paper bags spread, a thought crossed our minds - paper is made mostly from trees and lots of resources are required to just make the paper, including the chemicals, electricity, and the fossil fuel used in shipment. So is the paper bag really eco-friendly? Is it really a good alternative to a plastic bag? And *where does a paper bag end its useful life?*

Paper, when thrown away, can either be recycled or end up in the landfill. If it finds its way to the landfill and over time (usually a few months) it will break down into organic material (see <http://www.discoveret.org/ksb/Facts.htm> for degradation rates of different kinds of materials).

Both paper and plastic bags consume large amounts of natural resources and the majority would eventually end up in the landfill. Both plastic and paper bags can be reused, and can be recycled to some extent. We come across many studies comparing the two choices. Some studies say that plastic is the better overall choice, others paper. Paper may consume more resources to produce; however, it is also more recyclable than plastic if you consider that paper can be composted and plastic, not. For the average person, the choice boils down to convenience.

In our opinion, the best overall choice is to use a durable, reusable bag- a *cloth bag*. They are handy and washable. Most cloth bags usually last for 3 to 10 years and more. No wonder that they are called *bags for life*. With this ideology, we decided to focus on cloth bags. We followed the same method as with paper bags, of approaching the local shops.

Spreading the message abroad

We feel that the scenario is not so bad, and there are many people who care and would like to do the right thing. We decided to focus on such people from our neighbourhood. We, project members, decided to meet neighbouring housing societies to promote the idea of plastic-bag free suburbs and to spread the use of cloth bags. To facilitate this we provided the cloth bags to the neighbouring housing societies. Because the cloth bags were already available, this idea took off very fast.

Where do we go from here?

It was important for us to try out this project in our own locality to understand the practical difficulties one could face. Hopefully, one day we would be able to spread this idea beyond Thakur Village.

While mulling over how this project developed, we realised that shopkeepers will not go out of their way to change their way of packaging. Customers are also set in their ways and “eco-friendly” does not rate highly in their existence. Hence, most of them would not give up the convenience of plastic bags, unless it is forced upon them (e.g., making it unavailable, through a ban by the government). Someone said it rightly “*law comes into action where education fails*”. Most of us know that using plastic is not good for the environment, but we do not want to pay attention to that (education failed), hence the law came into action (plastic bags banned). How much enforcing can the government do? The scenario will not change unless people understand the reasoning behind the ban on plastics. Creating awareness about the ill-effects of plastics is the key to a cleaner environment. I am sure that things will change for better when communities and people work together.

“Small steps can make a big difference”

Without the cooperation and active involvement of the Thakur village community, the group leaders, the housing society committee, and volunteers this step would not have been taken. I am grateful to all of them.

