

Using Nature as A Teacher

Priti Rao



My story is rooted in small beginnings. Growing up like any normal girl in 80's, I loved every bit of Bangalore – the climate, the people and the culture. I always wanted to be an Air Force pilot. I came close to realising my dream but fell short by an inch. Having had to let go of my aspirations, I reluctantly pursued studies and managed to complete an MBA. Life took its turns. Although I had a good career, working for corporates left a void. There was something amiss. I quit working after my marriage, a move that gave me enough space for myself. The birth of my child gradually changed my perspectives and thinking. We lived abroad for a while and travelled. This experience, coupled with yoga, helped me in the understanding of myself and the world around. Then came the crucial turning point. We decided to move back to India. This was in 2007.

After coming back, perhaps the first thing I noticed was this Bangalore was not the Bangalore that I knew. The landscape had changed dramatically. With the rise of global demand for software and IT services, Bangalore had already established itself on the world map as the go-to-city for IT. Naturally, it attracted people from all over India and the world with the promise of a better life, but uncontrolled development and poor waste management had made it completely unrecognisable.

As I went deeper, I discovered many things. The tree cover had diminished. The temperature and rainfall pattern had shifted. Lakes were dry and polluted or encroached upon. Air quality was deteriorating. Consumerism was at an all-time high, waste management was appalling and civic sense falling apart. Bangalore was no different from any other city in India or a growing city in any other developing nation.

I started to think: Is this what we are leaving behind for future generations? Are our actions justified and sustainable? Can we reduce or reverse the damages at all? What could I do at my level as an individual? I turned inwards for answers. A more sustainable lifestyle? Would that not reduce the burden on nature? Was that not the way humans

lived on this planet for thousands of years?



We thought of giving it a try. With the help of my family, we soon started growing herbs and vegetables on our terrace, installed a bio-gas plant that converted wet waste into cooking gas and started composting and making manure. We also installed solar panels to generate electricity, harvested rainwater and discovered the use of bio-enzymes and stopped using chemical-based cleaners at home. With these simple practices, we not only reduced our dependency on the market but also our carbon footprint. The journey is continuous but fulfilling. Motivated by my own limited success, I wanted to see if I could help others lead a sustainable lifestyle. Thus, *Soil and Soul* was born!

Soil and Soul gave me a platform to express myself. Soon, I started engaging with communities and even corporates. Many eco-friendly products were born. Throughout my journey, I realised that adults



lack awareness and motivation when it came to sustainability. Convenience had overtaken the concern for our environment, whereas children's thinking was the exact opposite! Through my interactions with children, I found them more receptive to ideas with the ability of bringing major changes at home. But unfortunately, no school taught any of this as part of the curriculum or learning.

Realising that helping develop an earth-friendly mindset in our future generation is one of the most important tasks that we have at hand, I thought maybe I could help fill the gap in our education system. This resolve gave us at *Soil and Soul* an opportunity to develop an experiential learning module around waste management. We called it the *Zero Waste Campus Programme (ZWC)*. ZWC is a year-long programme meant for any educational institution, schools or a colleges that wishes to handle its own waste effectively. ZWC is designed in such a way that it involves all the stakeholders - students and staff members. The idea is to make everyone accountable and responsible for the waste they generate and manage that waste. Through this programme, we attempt to bring behavioural changes in terms of ownership to help in leading a sustainable lifestyle.

The programme is divided into four major modules: *Awareness, Audit, Management and Live, Hands-on projects and In-house projects*. First, we divide



the children into groups based on their age and work with them to create awareness about sustainability. For example – how to be an informed and responsible consumer? What is a typical product life cycle? How does waste get generated, where does it end up and what harm does it do? The *Awareness* module runs throughout the year.

Once the children understand the basics, we take up the *Audit* exercise. This identifies the amount of waste that the school generates and the disposal methods we could use. This helps us create a baseline for waste generation. We create a blueprint for managing the waste both inside and around the campus. Throughout the programme, children are made conscious about various ways to reduce and treat waste. The programme ends with an appreciation for the live-project curated by children. Typical examples are: creating a herb garden and setting up compost and enzyme making units, or setting up a small-scale handmade paper unit to recycle paper that schools generate.



We use a wide variety of teaching methods to create impactful learning. Audio and visual teaching aids help in capturing the imagination of children. A principle that is very useful is *gamification*. Driven by group activities, simulations, fun and games, this method ensures that the child is fully involved and learning. We also draw inspiration from yoga and nature. Practices, such as *sankalpa* (resolve), *yoga nidra*, hug-a-tree, etc help us reinforce the ideas and concepts. *Soil and Soul* documents the entire year's journey and we have observed many interesting behavioural changes, such as the following:

- children sharing homemade sweets / fresh fruits / dry fruits, instead of chocolates with their classmates on their birthdays
- children insisting that their parents avoid plastics as much as possible – e.g. carrying cloth shopping bags from home
- talking to shopkeepers and educating them on the adverse environmental impact of plastic bags

- shorter shopping lists: children showed alternative preferences
- acceptance of do-it-yourself methods instead of buying packaged goods – for example, children learned to make their own bio-cleaners instead of buying chemical-based cleaners
- improvement in overall personality through soft skills – active listening, group discussion, articulation, assertiveness, ownership, etc

The list above may appear to be small improvements, but in reality, they achieve the bigger purpose of making the child aware of his/her actions with respect to the environment.

These changes were not easy to bring about. We had to convince everyone at every stage of our programme. Having interacted with many schools including reputed international schools across various states, concepts like this are hard to sell.

To start with, most schools do not even think there is a need for environmental education which is not based just on textbooks but on experiential adaptation and real life. These mainstream schools rely on classroom teaching and focus mainly on academics. Management priorities, lack of awareness and commitment towards environmental education are deterrents to experiential education. There is, of course, another type of school where there is some acceptance of such learning, but they either do not have management buy-in or lack funds. Many government and some private schools fall into this category. *Soil and Soul* has always helped such schools by delivering free workshops, etc. The third category of schools is alternative schools where some initiatives are already in place. Both students and faculty are inclined towards experimenting and learning. Our chances of engaging with such schools are higher.

We have seen rural schools and children responding better to such programmes than their city counterparts. Many government schools run their own voluntary programmes to educate children on topics like environment, conservation and waste. For example, in Sikkim, children are taught this, and a greater awareness exists. In general, attitude of parents towards environmental education is changing, but they look up to the schools to provide basic education about it.

Things become easier if a school agrees to go with our programme. We sincerely believe that as


long as our intentions are honest, the results will speak for themselves. I often say children are like sponges, they have the capacity to absorb anything – it all depends on how effectively we communicate our ideas to them. In my opinion, they are the best change agents! A case in point is Greta Thunberg, a teenage climate change activist who has been making waves across Europe, the US and Australia. Along with thousands of children, she is forcing policy makers to act fast on global warming. India too needs to act before it is too late. We need our younger generation to question status-quo and contribute towards taking the country forward in terms of environmental stewardship.

When I look at waste management in India, I see many issues. First, the *my-waste-is-not-my-responsibility attitude*. This has to change. We are responsible for the waste that we generate. Today, our oceans are being dumped with insane amounts of plastic, our rivers, lakes and water bodies are polluted. Growing affluence is given rise to maddening consumerism resulting in creating unnecessary waste around us. Mountains, deserts, forests are also not being spared. Global climate change is a reality. Although it may not be practical for everyone to lead a carbon free lifestyle, waste and environment should be everyone's concern. We are sitting on a ticking time-bomb. Only awareness, time-bound and credible large-scale actions can save our country and the world.

Along with waste management, *Soil and Soul* has programmes focussing on food, energy and water too. The *Live* projects vary from institution to institution based on what they choose to do. For example, grow your food, transforming a school into renewable energy source or water management system, to name a few. We are open to their ideas and weave our programme according to the requirement. Every programme is definitely enriching their experiences and the learning is for their lives.

At *Soil and Soul*, instead of focusing on issues alone, we try to innovate simple solutions that can address everyday challenges. These products are completely natural, handmade and sustainable. Money earned through the sale of these products feeds our efforts of engaging with various communities across the nation to bring about a positive change in society.

Having worked on the education part, though I feel satisfied, I keep reminding myself of my bigger



responsibility, which is to reach out to as many children and communities as possible. My dream is to create a campus one day that enables children in

environmental leadership.

Who knows, that day may not be too far...!

Priti Rao is a Bangalore based eco-entrepreneur. She is the founder of Soil and Soul, an organisation that is engaged in creating awareness about sustainability. Priti is a learner, sustainability practitioner, yoga teacher and holds a black belt in karate. Priti likes traveling and teaching. She may be contacted at priti@soilandsoul.in