

Transforming Lives

Birth of a Dry Waste Collection Centre



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The Covid lockdowns left me with two choices – either steal or forage waste for a living. The first wasn't an option, so here I am," says Amiddul, a waste picker from Bengali Basti, Vasant Kunj. "A year ago, this place was a filthy latrine filled with waste, broken glass and syringes. We'd pick through the garbage with our bare hands," he continues, looking out from a makeshift shed into the driving rain and shin-deep sludge he's accustomed to trawling with sacks of refuse on his back. It wasn't long ago that Amiddul worked as a driver for a family in the neighbourhood. The pandemic robbed him of his job and life's savings. As the only earning member in his family and a child to put through school, he took to the only workplace that presented itself – the Vasant Kunj *dhalao*, a festering heap of urine, faeces and mixed waste.

That *dhalao* of a year ago, is unrecognizable now. With only dry waste coming in, the rotting food waste and the stench are things of the past. Gone is the eyesore which was bang in the centre of the bustling Vasant Kunj market and which was quite a health hazard. In its new avatar, it's a dry waste centre, collaboratively designed to meet the needs of both the public and waste pickers like Amiddul who



Before Renovation



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Credits: Saahas

After Renovation

comb it for recyclables. It's been renovated, whitewashed and ventilated, its wall raised, and equipped with bags and bins for waste pickers. The façade has been beautified with messages and arts about segregation.

The transformation of the *dhalao* was one of the key objectives of Alag Karo. Launched in Vasant Kunj in 2021 on the heels of its successful first phase in Gurugram, phase 2 also focused on source segregation and stream lining segregated waste collection. In Vasant Kunj, it was implemented in about 2,000 households managed by six Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs). The program also entailed composting of their wet waste at an offsite composting site.

Alag Karo is based on a collaborative approach, involving various stakeholders through focused training programs for residents, maids, housekeeping staff and external waste collectors; door to door awareness and monitoring streamlining waste collection processes and infrastructure; and setting up a monitoring program for an enduring transformation.

Prior to the intervention, residents across these 6 societies handed over mixed waste to the housekeeping staff from Vatavaran, a private agency contracted by RWAs for door-to-door waste collection. The dry waste was taken in rickshaws to the *dhalao*, where Amiddul and other waste workers sorted the dry waste and then the sorted dry waste was transported to Masoodpur, a waste workers colony in the vicinity, and sold the recyclables to aggregators. Wet waste was transported by SSIL, the South Delhi Municipal Corporation's (SDMC) concessionaire, to its composting pits. Contaminated and non-recyclable dry waste was compacted and send to Okhla Sanitary landfill, Okhla, New Delhi by SSIL.

Things have undergone a sea change, says Raj Kumar, head of Vatavaran operations in the Vasant Kunj area for the past 28 years. "Often broken Glass, nails etc. mixed in waste would injure our boys. Now that people are aware of the 3 categories, they give it separately. Through the Alag Karo project, our collection staff has been given three bags each to collect segregated dry, wet and domestic hazardous waste. We've partitioned our rickshaws for dry waste, added a bucket for wet waste and a box for hazardous waste," he explains. In addition to equipping

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the collectors with protective masks and gloves, the field team has been trained to monitor waste segregation and also record methodically the kind of waste given by each house on a daily basis. “Earlier people did not bother when the housekeeping staff told them to segregate waste as that has been a nationwide rule since 2016 Through the Alag Karo project, people have been sensitized to the hazards of handling mixed waste and our staff has also been trained on how to speak clearly, politely but confidently. These monitoring sheets give them the required confidence.” says Project Coordinator, Shahbaz Rao. Blocks B-10, B-11 and B-7 in Vasant Kunj subsequently won Swacch Society recognition by the South Delhi Municipal Corporation based on data from these monitoring sheets.

The support and cooperation of the Resident Welfare Associations has been instrumental in the success of the initiative, particularly where some residents or waste agency contractors were uncooperative. Across colonies, committed RWA members organised events and meetings, issued circulars to residents, shared messages on community groups, penalised defaulters, and closely monitored the program at their level. “We had to use a carrot and stick approach. It worked well and people appreciated the mission approach that the RWAs had adopted for this initiative.” recalls Ashok Varmani, President, B-10 RWA, whose community went from 11% to 98% source segregation of its 450 kgs of daily waste in six months. The block generates 450 kgs of waste per day. Mr. Varmani is now pushing for secondary segregation at B-10. “We’ve issued circulars that sanitary and hazardous waste should also be separated. After all, people who’re collecting it are humans and their dignity and health is very important. Our aim is minimizing waste and high level of segregation. We organise meetings with residents for awareness and encourage them to adopt home composting,” he says.

Alag Karo’s success at B-10 generated a buzz that encouraged many residents and neighbouring RWAs to come on board. After B 10, B-11 expressed interest in implementing source segregation, a step towards zero waste society with its very enthusiastic and supportive residents. Residents and housekeeping staff attended its Valentine’s Day programme organised under the project, ‘Love for the Planet’. With five RWA members driving segregation in 256 units, B-11 is well on the road to become a zero waste society, diverting 275 kgs of daily waste it generates.



Dry Waste Primary Sorting at the Dhalao After Renovation

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IEC Installation in Delhi

At Yamuna Apartments, RWA member Parul Chaudhary was not very optimistic, these NGOs begin with a bang, tick their project milestones and soon after things fizzle out. Seeing the project's commitment and persistence to solve the problems patiently and systematically, she was pleasantly surprised. She was so motivated, she took to personally supervising the program, attending every training to ensure it was well attended. She firmly stood by the project's implementation partner Saahas and demanded improving the waste collection infrastructure. Yamuna Apartments now segregates 85% of the 568 kgs of waste its 476 units generate every day.

The program faced many challenges. Initially when a few RWAs were reluctant, Saahas approached the SDMC to enforce compliance with the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016. At B-7, the smallest society with 184 units generating 220 kgs of waste daily, the waste collectors continued mixing wet and dry waste to "save time" even when the residents were segregating and the collectors had gone through extensive training and sensitisation. Investment in infrastructure was another battle, the RWA at Saraswati Apartments and the external waste management agency continue to pass the buck between each other even till date. Ganga Apartments was a sterling example of quickly realizing the importance of good infrastructure and was able to allocate budget for the same. Despite these roadblocks, the segregation rate at B-7 is 85%. At Saraswati Apartments, it has increased from 5-8% to 50-55% for 564 kgs of waste generated every day.

While the project was able to make significant impact, certain things need to be improved. Composting at SSIL's pits is not being managed too well, without the addition of bio-enzymes or regular turning, there is serious stench issue. Stray cows wander in to feed on fresh scraps, leachate flows on to the adjoining footpath during the rains. The waste from societies that weren't part of this intervention, is also at times mixed in the composting pits and hence the compost is contaminated with plastic and broken glass.

While only 6 of the RWAs in Vasant Kunj have implemented source segregation, the impact is quite visible and there is lot of interest all around. Residents are quite enthused with the transformation that their simple act was able to bring about. Amiddul says with palpable relief, "With only dry waste coming in and the renovations at the *dhalao*, our work has become faster and much easier. Everyone should segregate".