

Celebrating With Plastic

The exuberance and excitement of festivals approaching is common for all of us. The adrenaline pumps as we are in a haste to ensure everything is up-to-date. You don't want to miss out on any excitement. Be it buying the stickiest Holi color or the loudest cracker for Diwali, you want to enjoy to the fullest. However, in the fun of festivities, you screw up the environment. Here is a fictional story, through the eyes of a 12-year old boy, about how improper inheritance of celebrating festivals is harming our environment. If you've had enough of save-the-world talk, then also read. May be, you will like the story and share it with someone.

This is my first fiction write-up. I have tried to use the story to convey a message about controlling pollution. The writing may be amateurish, but I hope you like it.



Festivals, I don't know or celebrate much in the family. For all that I experience in festivals is a tense household. Baba comes home from work tired, frustrated, and drunk. His irate behavior during major festivals, Holi and Diwali, has annoyed us for years. All families in the Chawl seemed to enjoy the festivities with smiles, fireworks, colors, and happiness. In our house, there are fireworks, not literal fireworks, but fireworks emanating from the arguments between my parents. At times, I've witnessed fist fights between them. And I must admire my mom's fighting capabilities as she manages to sedate Baba while he is drunk to the core. Otherwise, it's the male strength that rules the household.

I am mighty scared off my father while he is drunk. However, a sober dad is a sweetheart and has been mighty lovable. He has been especially nice on mine and Didi's birthdays. I still remember my 8th birthday when he took us out for dinner at the Zunka Bhakar Hotel on Chowpati. We had wonderful Pav Bhaji and my gift for the night was a large balloon and a key-operated car. I still have the car, although I broke its windshield within two days of my ownership.



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Coming to the present, things were pretty tense as Holi was nearing and Baba had been coming home drunk. Fortunately, there were no fights, but I could see it starting any minute in the evening. I feel that the cause of Baba's worry is not Holi, but - finance.

He was fired by Modern Housing Society, his previous employer two months back. He was unemployed for 60 days, which is an eternity for weekly-wage workers like Baba. Our bank savings of approximately Rs. 2000 is spent. However, thankfully, he was recruited in a new society last week.

It was my 12th birthday last week and it overlapped with Holi. My celebration or gift expectancy for this year was very low. And I would not force the issue with my parents as I know they are already strifed.

However, unexpectedly, two days before holi, Baba called and asked what I want this birthday. He said, "I cannot guarantee a gift tomorrow, but after two days I will get you a present. I expect some bakshis (festival bonus) from the society residents where I work. I will use that to get you a birthday present. I know you are my sweetheart and will not demand something that is out of my reach." I was overwhelmed by the gesture. But, I could smell alcohol. Suddenly my excitement faded away. A drunken Baba scares me more than the Witch in my dreams, who apparently looks like my school principal. He sat in the passage outside our Kholi and had a Soda bottle, Whiskey, and a glass labeled Bagpiper placed on the floor. He had his back to the wall and I had kneeled down to talk with him. The strong alcohol smell emanating from his breathe made me a bit numb. I didn't reply to his question for few minutes. All I could hear was the song *Dhagala Lagli Kala* played on a loudspeaker in the Chawl's courtyard.

Baba asked again, "Tell me what you want as a birthday present?" I flashed back to the present. I mustered some courage and asked for something intangible. I said, "Baba, I want to spend a day with you while you go to work on Holi." I don't know how I asked such a favor/present. I think that I surprised myself more than Baba. But my aim was simple – investigating why is Baba so irate after work on Holi and Diwali. I could see the initial surprise in Baba's eyes and later some distress. However, I didn't notice anything aggressive, so I sat down from the kneeled posture. Baba looked down, and pondered hard about my request. He poured some soda in the glass and then some whiskey. He took a couple of sips from the glass. As he sipped alcohol, I stared at the bubbles fizzling in the glass. I have always liked to observe the bubble fizzles in Baba's alcohol or in cold drinks. So, again I was moved away from the present. While I stared at the bubbles, Baba's words brought me back to the present discussion. He just said – "Be ready at 12 noon on your Birthday. I don't have an office to show you like the sahibs in the building, but I hope the visit will help you to understand why I want you to study and how much I work to keep my family."

You must be wondering what his profession is. Well, I don't have any regrets in telling that he is a cleaner. Popularly folks from his profession are referred to with a different title, which I shall reveal in some time.



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An additional source of income for us was the daily-waged garbage pickup assignments given by the local municipal corporation. However, as Jadhav Saahib lost the municipal elections 3 months back, even that employment was snatched from Baba. The new Saahib, who won the election, is from a party that Baba tells works well for some minority, but ignores us. I am too young to understand why it is so, Baba says.

Well, it was the D-day and I was ready to go out with Baba. We walked 45 minutes to reach the society where Baba worked. Thankfully, the weather was overcast and it helped me keep pace with Baba. The society had a gigantic entrance gate with neatly-dressed security guards patrolling the visitors. Baba introduced me to them and said that I stood first in my class. They were impressed and wished us Happy Holi. One of them also gave me a Peda, which I accepted after Baba signaled his approval.

The garden in the building is more impressive than the gate. It has a plush lawn with grass and neatly-cut bushes on the side. However, the grass lawn's splendor was spoiled by loads of shabby plastic bags (used as water balloons), and color. I had seen such scenes after Holi in the Chawl, but they never bothered me as the Chawl was mostly untidy. Consequently, more shabbiness in a dirty place never irked me like the way I was disturbed on observing this campus. I again went into the world of my thoughts. I came back to the present when Baba asked me to sit on a bench. Baba went away and brought the broom and dustbin to clean the lawn.



It took him an hour to collect the plastic bags from the lawn. He sat next to me after picking up the plastic bags and showed me the garbage bin. It was full to the brim with plastic. I kept staring at the bin and again visited my thoughts that took me to a classroom session on pollution. I could see and hear my



teacher speaking in her authoritative tone – “Kids, don’t use plastic bags. Plastic is slowly eating our wonderful earth. See this plastic demon on the chart. It is gobbling up the fertile land from where you get your favorite vegetables. In addition, cows and cattles also eat plastic bags and die. Even marine life is in danger due to the plastic demon. Don’t you like to drink milk? I am sure many of you also like to eat fish. However, if we all continue to use plastic, we could soon have a day when you will not have milk to drink or fish to eat.”

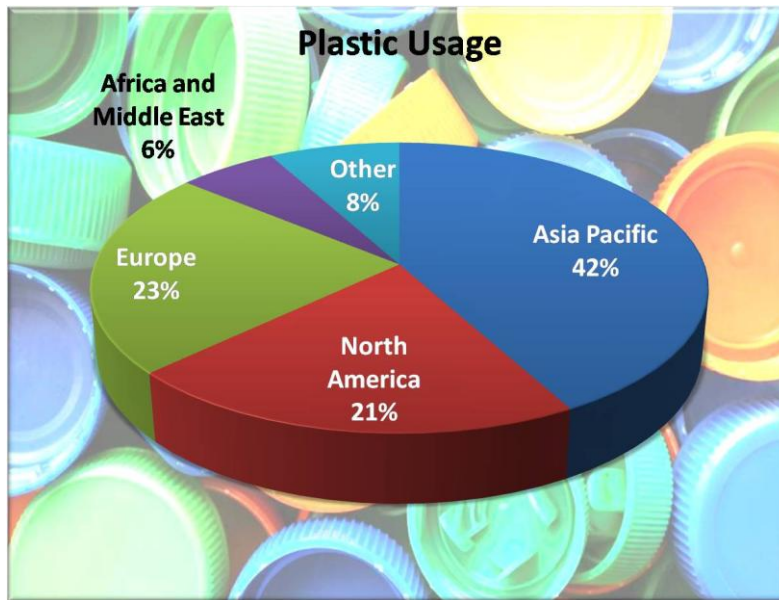
I got darn scared on this note as I love, both, Milk and Fish. Milk was a luxury at my home, but when I got it, I slept well. And Maa cooks really good Fish. So, I don’t want a time when I cannot consume either Fish or Milk. I have never liked Vegetables much, so fear of losing Veggies didn’t scare me much. However, my Didi loves Vegetables, so I would like even Veggies to stay for her.

The teacher continued, “See the chart again. The world’s present plastic consumption is 100 million tonnes. That is, 1,000,000,00 tonnes. Where 1 tonne is equal to 1000 Kilogram.” We were all awed by these numbers. I am sure, like me, no one could imagine how much these numbers meant, but they seemed to be large numbers just for great amount of weight they referred to. And, my fear of losing Milk and Fishes forever worried me more. The teacher added, “No one is sure how long does plastic takes to degrade, but some say that it will take 1000 years to degrade.”

As I sit on the bench, I recall the horror of losing two of my favorite edible items. I also recall some facts about plastic displayed on the chart.

- Plastic bags cause hundreds of thousands of birds, sea turtle and cattle deaths because these creatures mistake plastic trash for food
- Plastic garbage dumped into the water kills approximately 10,00,000 sea creatures every year
- These animals suffer a painful death, the plastic wraps around their intestines or they choke to death
- Plastic takes many years to decompose and makes land infertile
- Burning plastic emanates poisonous gases
- Four to five trillion plastic bags are manufactured each year





I hear Baba ask, “Why are you staring at the plastic bags? Scared by the amount of work I do on Holi?” I say nothing, but nod. Baba assumes that I am scared by the amount of work for Baba on Holi. However, my real worry is – How to stop such an amount of plastic going into some Cattle’s or Fish’s stomach? I may be greedy as I aim to protect my food chain, but in the process I am helping mother Earth. As I think it over, Baba stretches his back, goes into a store room and comes back with another, large garbage bin.

He asks me to follow him into the building. As we reach the first storey, Baba rings the bells of all the apartments in a hurry. I see one kid, of approximately my age, open the door and call his mother, “**Maa, Kachra Waala aa gaya.**” Literally, this means, Garbage Vendor has come. I was shocked by this reference to my Baba. I had grown up attaching the **Waala** verb to vendors. For example, *Ice Cream Waala* to refer to sellers of ice cream or *Sabji Waala* to refer to Grocery vendors. As per my understanding, Waala is associated with the supplier of some tangible goods. So, as my Baba supplied cleanliness and hygiene, he should be referred to as **Safai Waala** or **Cleanliness Vendor**. Baba seemed unperturbed by this reference. He collected the garbage from all households, picked up more plastic bags and plastic balloons lying in the stairs, and moved on to the next storey.

First, the plastic heap and then the humiliating reference to my Baba. I had already had a bad day at Baba’s office. I wanted to run away, but stayed on to face more like a brave soldier.

Before we moved up, Baba asked folks from each apartment to keep a bucket full of water outside their flat. I wondered why he needed the water. Does he plan to play Holi with me or the owners at a later stage? In either case, why a bucket full of water from each apartment? The story repeated on consecutive levels of the building. Baba was referred to with the same title and I kept getting irked.



When we were through with the chore on the highest level, Baba spilled the water buckets and I jumped up as I tried to avoid the water. I was surprised!

Now, in the seven storey building, there were four apartments at each level. And, we spilled 28 buckets of water to clean the building's stairs. As per the water consumption of my family in the Chawl, 28 buckets of water will suffice for 5-days. So much water enables us to perform our chores with ease. At one point, I was tempted to ask Baba to take away couple of buckets of water to our Kholi. But, I resisted the temptation. On most days, we received 4-6 buckets of water at 5 AM. Maa gets up to stock water supply before the tap runs dry.

It took Baba approximately 5 hours to clean the Holi mess in the society. At the end of it, we had 4 bins of plastic balloons and 3 bins full of household waste.

Baba and I kept talking about why Baba gets frustrated on Holis. The answer was clear – too much work and a tired body. However, my cause of worry was not a tired Baba, but the concern – how to protect my food supply? I may be too young to understand the gravity of climate change, which teacher keeps preaching about. However, I really understand the threat to my food chain. So, these plastic bags really haunted me more than a drunk Baba or the school principal's look-alike Witch from my dreams.

I walk with Baba as he leads me to a large Garbage Bin located on the street outside the building. However, my concern about the plastic bags still rules my mind. I was lost in my thoughts and Baba was about to empty the bin full of plastic balloons - when I recalled the magic word – **RECYCLE**.

I held Baba's hand with authority and said – **STOP**. Baba was surprised. I got scared as I expected Baba to hit me for interfering in his work. Before he reacted, I said, "*Baba, these Bags could help us earn some money.*" He exclaimed, "How?"

I explained him, as per my teacher's lecture, about recycling units that buy used plastic and recycle. I tried my best to convince Baba to give it a try. However, all seemed to go in vain as he seemed ignorant and couldn't believe that someone could pay for such useless plastic. So, as it happens in adolescence, when you want something from your parents, but don't seem to get it – you are accompanied by tears. Baba couldn't see me weep on my birthday, so he agreed to give recycling a try. I told Baba the address of the recycling unit in our locality. I recollected it from my school lecture. Baba requested one of the security guards to accompany us to the unit and carry a container filled with plastic bags.

We reached the unit and sold the bags for Rs 20, which is not a large amount, but was good enough for an ice cream that Baba bought me. I was satisfied by doing my bit for the environment and securing my food chain. While eating ice cream in a garden, Baba asked me why was I adamant to recycle. I patiently explained him about pollution and my fear of losing milk and fish. I tried to be as authoritative as my teacher, but couldn't. At the end of the story, as I lick the ice cream, I see that Baba is proud of me and my thinking. He smiles and I see that his eyes are moist. He doesn't say anything, but just looks at me,



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smiles, and at the end, moves his hand over my hair. He had never done a gesture like this. It really felt good.

As we walked back, I confirmed with Baba whether his frustration on Holi was due to extra work? His response was yes. I let my inquisitive behavior ask one more question – Is this the same reason you dislike Diwali? His response was cold that left me blue – ***“You Aaji (granny) had an Asthma attack on the eve of Diwali while you were not born. The attack was due to the smoke emanating from the extensive fireworks in the Chawl. She couldn’t survive the attack.”***

We reached home and on my request, Baba didn’t buy his dose of Alcohol. He decided to relax with a cup of tea. Maa was pleasantly surprised to see a cheerful Baba. We sat outside our Kholi and had some tea and Kanda Pohe that Maa had cooked. It was 5 PM. The sun’s rays were warm but comforting as they kissed our floor. I sat there and saw the sun lowering in the sky. I felt satisfied at the end of the day. But, I am still concerned about how we have made our festivals a danger for many lives. I am just a kid and can think about pollution. I hope grownups also start to protect our food chain and the world. I will request my teacher to take lectures on pollution for all adults in my Chawl. I hope it will help us to protect the world in a small way.



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Some tips to reduce pollution:

- Use traditional clothe bags to buy groceries
- Use steel bottles to drink water in office
- Switch-off monitors while you move away from your desk
- Avoid using plastic bags or bottles
- Use more fans and avoid Air Conditioners
- Cycle to work if possible
- Maintain personal hygiene so that clothes don't get dirty
- Spill less water
- Celebrate Diwali with minimal fireworks
- Celebrate Holi with natural colors, less water, and NO PLASTIC
- Use Handkerchief instead of tissue papers

Also, see the following video from www.ted.com:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrAShtolieg>

