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Home to 20,000 restaurants, Mumbai has 2 lakh kids who go hungry each day. 9.6 lakh kg of veggies and fruits are wasted daily. Are we a city of food-trashing care-a-damns?

Early last month, a YouTube video went viral within days of being uploaded. It was viewed 3.33 lakh times at last count. In the 1.53-minute long clip, Happy Life Welfare Society (HLWS), an NGO registered in Delhi with Mumbai operations, brought home an uncomfortable truth: there are two lakh children on Mumbai's streets who go hungry every day.

This is a matter of shame for a city that is consuming food now like it never has in the past. As of this year, Mumbai has over 20,000 restaurants in an industry worth well over Rs 57,000 crore. The Agricultural Produce and Market Committee (APMC) in Navi Mumbai, from where the city's various retailers, hoteliers and restaurants buy their daily supply of vegetables, fruits, grains and spices, receives close to 4,500 tonnes of grains and 12,000 tonnes (1,000 kg makes a tonne) of vegetables and fruits each day.

Yet, as Additional Municipal Commissioner Mohan Adtani points out, 70 per cent or 5,600 tonnes of the 8,000 tonnes of garbage collected by the BMC every day is "wet garbage," which includes leftovers of cooked food, rotten vegetables and fruits.

Bridging the gap

Kanupriya Singh, who started HLWS in 2009, decided something needed to be done to bridge this gap. With help from Abhinav Tripathi, senior creative director of ad firm McCann Erickson, and the Dabbawala Foundation, 38-year-old Singh conceived the Share My Dabba campaign - an endeavour to provide food that goes untouched in lunch boxes to street children.

In April, the campaigners distributed cards among 3,000 shopkeepers in Crawford Market urging them to share their lunch. The 150 who signed up were given a month's worth of 'Share' stickers. If a person is unable to finish his lunch, he pastes the sticker on his dabba. Every day, Singh intercepts dabbawalas collecting tiffins after lunch, empties contents of the right ones, ladling dal, sabzi, and rice or rotis onto plates for up to 30 children from in and around the area.

"Initially, I would have to call the children, but now, they come without calling, by 3.30 pm," she adds. On a good day, the food's enough for all 30, an elderly woman, and a blind person who sit with the kids. But such days are rare. Also, the dabbawalas don't operate on Sundays. Most days, there's just enough for 10. Singh ends up buying lunch from restaurants for the rest. For the three to 14-year-olds, many of who are street children who make money by begging, the meal's a whole lot better than what they previously resorted to - scavenging from garbage.

The campaign, says Abhishek Ekal, VP, Dabbawala Foundation, which covers 120 dabbawalas, has not affected the Harvard-approved Six Sigma network. "If there are complaints, we will incorporate changes and improve it," he adds. However, the campaign, which, this week, will also extend operations to Mulund (W), is barely a drop in the ocean.

The big waste picture

According to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, 1.3 billion tonnes of food is wasted annually. That's one-third of the global food production between farm and shop.

Globally, 870 million people go to bed hungry and more than 20,000 children under the age of five die from hunger every day. Such food wastage is termed, rather sedately, as food loss.

Food loss occurs at almost every stage. In India, the rotting of foodgrains grew from 19 tonnes in 2009-10 to 99 tonnes in 2010-11. In 2011-12, 200 tonnes of food grains rotted away in storehouses, according to a statement tabled by Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, K V Thomas, in the Lok Sabha.

Kirti Rana, director of APMC says the market provides supplies to nearly three crore customers daily. Of the 4,000 trucks that drive in from nearby farms each day, 450 carry grains and 600 carry assorted products like milk, sugar, tea, and spices. A little less than 3,000 trucks carry fruits and vegetables. That's 4,500 tonnes of grains and 12,000 tonnes of fruits and vegetables.

Rana estimates loss during transportation (most trucks travel at least eight hours) and off-loading at two per cent for spices and grains, eight to 10 per cent for fruits and vegetables. Taking in even a loss of eight per cent means that nearly 960 tonnes of fruits and vegetables never reach the market.

Connecting the dots

In 2012, Professor Suresh Mishra, chair professor of Consumer Affairs at the New Delhi-based Indian Institute of Public Administration led a two-and-a-half-month-long study across the National Capital Region (Delhi, Faridabad, Gurgaon and Ghaziabad) to analyse food wastage at weddings. After speaking to stakeholders - wedding planners, caterers and families - and attending many weddings, he found that between 15 to 25 per cent of the food cooked at such events never reached a human stomach. "During the wedding season, caterers typically have at least two to three weddings at a time. Items like paneer are stored.

However leftover dal, rice and roti that can't be reused are sold at discounted rates to pig farm owners," he says. "The grander the wedding, and the longer the menu, the more the wastage," he points out.

Think of your last visit to a restaurant - how much dal tadka or handi biryani remained in the dish as you paid your bill and exited? Leftovers from the city's 20,000 hotels and restaurants can be estimated at several hundred kilos a day. Arvind Shetty, president of Indian Hotels and Restaurants Association (AHAR) says that five per cent of whatever is cooked has to be thrown away.

The owner of a more than 150 year-old family-owned restaurant in south Mumbai's DN Road, says thali joints can't follow the cook-on-the-go practice, and waste between 50-100 kg of food per day. Wastage from table leftovers accounts for 10 per cent of what is dumped into public bins. At fast-food joints, food wastage is lesser at about 20 kg.

Shetty says that this is a concern that hoteliers are addressing. After all, it's a question of money. Yet, cutting down on the quantity of raw food isn't the only way to ensure that food doesn't go waste.

Most restaurants are happy to pack food left over from your meal. However, some don't as a matter of policy. In 2011, international fine dining restaurant Hakkasan came under flak for refusing to pack actors Tanuja and daughter, Tanisha's leftover meal. Restaurants at Parel's ITC Hotel are also known to discourage doggy bags. The reason they give is food safety. Zorawar Kalra, former owner of the Punjab Grill chain of restaurants, whose Masala Library will start operations in the tony Bandra Kurla Complex next month, says, "With Mumbai's heat and humidity, food can get spoilt in a couple of hours. Cooked food, if it can't be refrigerated, should be eaten within an hour of packing."

No one understands this better than entrepreneurs like Dr Kurush Dalal, proprietor of catering service Katy's Kitchen. He contends that 90 per cent of caterers throw away cooked food at the end of the night; one out of 10 events he caters for sees food being wasted. Dalal, who took over the family-run business 15 years ago, has tried to find organisations that'll pick up leftovers, but without success. "Some don't have vehicles and can't make it as late as midnight which is when most weddings wrap up. At banquets, food is re-heated. This can spoil fast and unless there is a cold storage facility, this food can't be preserved," he adds.

Meanwhile, at home...

With an increase in the number of nuclear and double income families, most households have little time to purchase fresh vegetables daily. Some like 52-year-old Seven Bungalows-resident and manager with Punjab National Bank, Bhavna Malani stock up for a week. That's convenient, but it leads to wastage. "At least one batch of veggies rots in the fridge each month and needs to be thrown," she says, adding that she would rather purchase vegetables and fruits for her household of four, every alternate day to ensure less wastage.

Mohit Khattar, managing director of Godrej Nature's Basket, which has 27 retail outlets across the country, says often the quality of products at their outlets is marred due to consumer habits. "Consumers feel the need to touch and press vegetables and fruits to test their quality, which eventually leads to 'bad appearance'," he says, adding that on an average seven-eight per cent of the 200 tonnes worth of perishable goods is sent back to their Thane warehouse at the end of the day, where most of it is sold to buyers who aren't specific about the 'look' of the produce.

Reams have been written about the marketing strategies of supermarkets that encourage people to hoard. Such behaviour inevitably leads to wastage of products once again, on account of inadequate and incorrect storage facilities. What most people can't figure is how to consume old food. Macrobiotic nutritionist Shonali Sabherwal says refrigerated food can be eaten for at least two meals more - if put in the freezer, it can last to as much as five days. In such cases, 40 per cent of the nutrition is lost, "but for someone who is starving, even that remaining 60 per cent nutrition is useful," she adds.

Executive chef of the Taj President, Ananda Solomon would agree. At the end of the day leftovers from the Cuffe Parade hotel's restaurants are collected by Byculla-based charity home Asha Dham. "We give dal, rice, roti and sabzi to the children," he says, adding that all food is tasted for quality first.

While setting up a food bank is the need of the hour, it isn't easy. It requires land, a dedicated vehicle and a minimum capital of Rs 30 lakh for a 512-cubic-foot cold storage

unit. Which is why Jaipur-based food bank Annakshtra set up by the Centre for Development Communication, has still not been able to expand its operations to Mumbai, despite wanting to. Dr Ambika Nal, its senior programme manager, says that they collect cooked leftovers from weddings and parties and store it overnight in their cold storage. The next morning, if the food is still edible, it is distributed to the underprivileged and labourers around the city. Every week, they distribute at least 1,200 meals. Till now the bank, which was started in 2010, has served over five lakh meals.

Back in Mumbai however, Singh's twomonth-old project is already in version 3.0. After receiving flak for sharing 'touched' food, Singh and Tripathi tweaked their requirements. Singh says, "We have to be careful. We've asked customers to share the dabba only if it's untouched. We request them to judge how hungry they are and leave sections untouched."

BE A WASTAGE WARRIOR

The UK-Based Institution Of Mechanical Engineers in a January 2013 report found that 1.2 to 2 billion tonnes of food produced around the world each year never reaches a human stomach. This is not just wastage of food, but also of natural resources used to produce food. Which is why the fao's theme on world environment day this year was "Think. Eat. Save." Here are easy ways to do your bit:

- » When dining out, request smaller portions. If that is not an option, consider ordering one dish between you and your friend. Request for a doggy bag in case of leftovers.
- » Use FIFO (First in First Out) as a kitchen rule. Cook and eat what you bought first. Store newly bought vegetables at the back of the cabinet/fridge. Keep older ones on top for easy access.
- » Keep the fridge temperature at below 5oC. Research shows that up to 70 per cent of our fridges are too warm, so food won't last as long as it could.
- » Bread goes stale faster in the fridge than outside. Store it in a cool, dark place such as a bread box.
- » Cling wrap items like meats and cheese or place them in an airtight container. Make most of your food by cooling leftovers as quickly as possible after cooking and storing them in the fridge.
- » Make a shopping list so that you don't buy more than you need. Don't succumb to marketing tricks (buy 1 get 1 free) that lead you to buy more food than you need. It may seem like a steal but it turns out more expensive overall if that much food is discarded.
- » 'Best before' dates suggest peak quality. Most foods can be safely consumed well after these dates. The important date to look out for is 'Use By'. Eat food by that date or check if you can freeze it.
- » Clean and cut veggies before putting them in the fridge. Use zip-lock bags to store food. Peas and meats are best stored in the freezer.
- » Instead of scrapping leftovers, transform them into another dish. Stale rice makes good fried rice, for instance.

PLATE LEFTOVERS TO MANURE

In 2007, Parel's ITC Hotel brought in the Organic Waste Converter, with the idea of

minimising waste production. Every two hours, the hotel staff dumps its vegetable waste and plate leftovers into the waste converter, which is capable of recycling 600 kg organic waste every day. Bone waste is dumped into a shredder and then into the OWC. Around 50 kg of organic waste is recycled at one go and about half to one kg saw dust is added with 25-50 gm of bacterial culture to promote the conversion into manure. After churning for about 10-15 minutes, manure is kept in baskets (above) and water is sprinkled on it to keep it wet. After 10 days, the manure is ready to be used in plants.