

Returning to Soil

Arpita Joshi

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I suppose it was fate that drove me to buy a book of poetry by Kuvempu, the great Kannada poet, from the stands at Lalbagh in Bangalore during one of its annual flower shows. It drove in deeper, this piece of fate, when I chanced to flip the book open at the poem 'Manure', and it spoke: "*Wherefore dost thou deprecate manure,/ O thou flower, swaying in the breeze,/ And bearing fragrance, at the top of the tree?/ If the roots are not fed with manure/ O tell me, how can the tree have a floral festival?*" I stood there under the great bower of ficus trees, and it took no big feat of imagination to understand what the poet meant. A tree is an embodiment of connection. Its roots firmly grasping the earth and the tall branches reaching for the clouds. In the poem, Kuvempu goes on to warn the flower of the dangers of individualised pride: "*Do thou not mock at manure; today or tomorrow/ Thou shalt drop down and become one with manure;/ That is the fate which is in store for thee!*"

It was a play of fate simply because lately, I had been preoccupied with compost or manure, as Kuvempu called it. I began considering the idea of composting my waste with no such lofty ideal of forging a connection. Having watched my once green city woefully come under the siege of distended consumption and waste, dealing with my own mound of waste was a simple exercise in finding a way to empower myself, to feel a little less helpless in the face of a problem that seemed too big. I didn't know then that this tiny act of giving attention to my waste would become the first step in the direction back to a valuable way of life that seems at the irredeemable brink of extinction.

Entering the lives of 'things'

In its search for efficiency, the city-life carpets over much that is vital and life-sustaining. Our food appears wrapped and hyper sanitised in cling-films put under strobe lights in departmental stores; our water is piped and available at the simple twist of a tap, and our daily waste vanishes from our doorsteps into an assumed ether. There is an artificial hastening, a filling of schedules that makes time tick faster and keeps us always on the run, away from the ability to reflect on the growing brevity but the increasing complexity of our connection with the world around us. The pre-occupation with efficiency is so high that we forget to ask ourselves – efficiency to what end? The climate crisis, knocking at our doors, has been asking if it has been truly productive to have lost touch with our immediate environment – our land, soil, water and air – elements that are fundamental to our existence and wellness.

These questions rose their heads almost immediately upon my first forays into the world of waste. The mere act of reorganising and categorising my waste, five minutes of attention to what was leaving my house in what form, meant that I began somehow automatically considering what came into my house in what form. **Where my relationship with the 'thing' entering my home had previously just been its consumption and use, now, I began considering where it had been and where it would head to beyond our brief dalliance.**

It is mind-boggling to have the world open at your feet quite this way. The more the number of things, the more the paths traversing the world, converging at you and then splitting away to new routes. The length of the journey, the number of points it went through processing and packaging, the actual time spent with the 'thing', its conclusion, its necessity and impact on the world – every little bit of its wandering is an eye-opener. As Keshav Jaini, citizen activist and educator who works on waste management, asks: "Because the quantity and the kind of garbage have changed, that's become a big question. What happens to your waste? What happens when you buy a product and stop using it? Now one of the things I say in my talks is that 'You must understand that everything you buy has a lifetime that you will use it, but after you stop using it, where does it go?'"

The individualised container existence in cities breaks open when you suddenly think about how everything around you travels—the spoon in your hand, the packaged food, the water through landscapes. You are not the only thing journeying; almost everything is. All is in constant movement. And even more awe-inspiring is that no form is final. From its inception as a blade of grass to a matured pod of wheat picked in the right season and conditions, thrashed by tired hands, moved through innumerable lands for its processing into a bag of 'atta' (flour) that you bring into your home, feed your child with, throw the wasted spat-out bits in the bin, that rots and breaks down in the municipal landfill – no form is absolute. Yet each form has a part to play in our environment, and the choice made in our brief meeting has tidal repercussions up and down the life cycle of both the 'thing' and our own lives.

The benefits of reconstructing the cycle

The act of composting allows us to stay with the cycle of the organic material longer than our mere consumption of it. Some days it feels like an almost voyeuristic act of following a fascinating stranger down the road just to know what the denouement of their story might be. **Managing a composter will quickly tell you that from the point you reject your food as spoiled or inedible, some other creature enters the picture with a very different view of taste and nourishment.**



Left: Harvesting my kitchen waste compost



Right: Harvesting my kitchen waste compost

A composter is a magical place where innumerable creatures you never knew of before begin to make their presence felt. Populating our knowledge of the web of life that surrounds us is an experience of awe, wonder and joy. One of my favourites has been the black soldier fly, a fly I had never before seen till I began composting. Harmless to humans, as detritivores or detritus/waste feeders, they obtain their food by consuming decomposing plant and animal parts. Depending on the climate belt you occupy, the insects and creatures you will find there will vary. They are active participants in the much deeper transformation at work. Padma Patil, a citizen activist who converted her apartment complex of 1332 households to composting, mentions, "The overall compassion we develop because of associating with waste is unlimited. Really. Today I feel I am a better human being than I used to be."

When we leave objects at our doorstep to vanish, we label them mentally as expendable, as no longer useful to us. But the path set by composting tells us how 'utility' within the larger world, beyond our limited boundaries of use, is much more complex. In the poem titled 'This Compost', Whitman wonders: *"O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?/ How can you be alive you growths of spring?/ How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?/ Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you?/ Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?"* As days pass, the constant sometimes simultaneous work of multiple creatures – from the invisible microbes to the more visible earthworms and maggots – begins to shift the chemical nature of the waste. In two months, a well-managed pile in a composter is unrecognisable. Gone are the waylaid peels, gangrene food, old leftovers, suspect vegetables and a whole police line-up of the inedible. There is instead the rich dark crumble of sweet-smelling humus.

In its finished fullness, the delectable smell of compost is a combination of rain-kissed soil with reminiscences of forests and lands dewed and golden in the morning light, the kind of smell that greets you from the floors of a virgin forest made wet from the first rains. I recently discovered that this smell has a fittingly lofty word. Its called petrichor, constructed from 'petra' meaning stone and 'ichor', referring

to the fluid which flowed in the veins of god in Greek mythology. This distinctive smell is the work of actinomycetes, a fungi like bacteria. It's one of the olfactory markers that tell you the 'waste' has come full circle and is now transformed to compost, a rich enriching supplement for soil. As Whitman concludes, *"Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,/ It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,/ (...) It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last."*

Learning to belong

Br. David Steindl-Rast, a renowned purveyor of the practice of gratitude, once pointed out, "look at what's there at your table, on your plate, there is no end to connectedness. In the end, (...) we always eat earth. We eat earth, not in an abstract way; in a very concrete way, this hummus is what we eat." As my monthly task of emptying the composter arrives, I show up, spade in hand in my baggy pants, tied hair and rolled up sleeves. I will spend a good couple of hours under the sun today tending to the little garden growing around the composter.



A melon on the vine



The air has a hint of petrichor, but it also has the sweetness of basil, the delicate whiff of jasmines, the acidity of tomatoes and much more that has been raised on this humus. I had desired empowerment, but something unnameable and more powerful has occurred. Actively managing my waste, witnessing the shifting form and flow of energy, holds deeper insight. Savita Hiremath, a citizen activist who works on solid waste management in Indian cities, pointed out this wisdom that

A regular visitor, the Common Tiger butterfly

composting brings: "You have to think back. You have to think, what if there was nothing called composting on this planet? There would be no life. To understand that decay is as important as growth in life – these are two faces of the same coin called life. There has to be decay if there has to be growth. For this decay all these little creatures visible and invisible, tangible and intangible ones – all these are important. That's when we begin to respect the interconnectivity of life."

The truth is that it is all too easy to get lost in a city. I don't mean here the navigation of tar-lined streets and concrete structures. I mean getting lost in the life that a city creates around itself. Its tinsel artificial lights and messages of immediate gratification are powerful magnets. All the billboards and media are constantly streaming utterances that whisper to individuation, of disconnection from the natural world, of endless consumption. On days when their call is strong, I think of the flower atop the tree; the one Kuvempu wrote about—puffed up in its beauty and self-importance, not recognising how its veins are filled with the nectar drawn from the depths of the

soil, not knowing that its end is to merge with the soil it mocks. I think of Whitman's lines: *"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/ (...)For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."*, and I find myself falling back into my place in the web, humbled and grateful to be one amongst the multitudes of wonder the world presents. This is the great gift of compost.

(Arpita Joshi is a co-founder of The Curio-city Collective (TCC) and the co-host of TCC's podcast. You can listen to the full interviews with the individuals mentioned in the article in our waste management and composting series on www.thecuriocitycollective.org)