



THINK LABOR

To keep up with everything skilling and employment

Rural Plastic Waste Management Survey

The idyllic image of a village in India, with lush green trees, clean, pristine rivers, clear sky and picturesque views is fast dwindling, owing to the growing menace of plastic waste in rural India.

Plastic waste continues to be a major challenge to the environment, with India generating about 3.5 million tons of plastic waste annually. Every year, we see a plethora of initiatives taken by the Government and Civil Society in urban India to educate the masses for proper waste disposal and management practice. However, very little is understood and researched about the situation of plastic waste that has engulfed rural India.

In a bid to expand the understanding and bring this issue to the fore, Pratham launched a nationwide Plastic survey in 710 districts in 15 states, in the month of May. The survey saw the deployment of teams on ground for a period of 7 days. Every state was divided into clusters and this project took me to Katharwara, a village in Lucknow district, Uttar Pradesh. Each day of this program was meticulously designed, the first session of which involved introducing the team to the different types of plastics and the peril of throwing it away into the environment. I attended this session with rapt attention, momentarily forgetting the inadequate amount of sleep I got the night before. As each session glided into another, there wasn't a moment of ennui or boredom. As development practitioners who work at the intersection of employment, skilling and migration, this survey presented a novel opportunity to think beyond our core discipline. The subsequent sessions introduced us to the 8 survey forms that had been painstakingly designed to capture the behavior and attitude of different stakeholders in a village regarding plastic waste and its disposal, namely, village pradhan, (government) hospital, (government) school, scrap dealer, tea stall, general store, 12 household surveys and a general observation survey. For me, this part of training is the most stimulating part of the process, where we get acquainted with the survey forms, take part in role play, envision different permutation and combinations of challenges that can come up on ground and how we can offer solution to mitigate them. At the same time, the most taxing part of the process was learning how to map the village on paper with its meandering roads, hundreds of houses, important landmarks, that will assist us on Day 0 to divide the village in 4 parts and use the left-hand rule to survey households so that every part of the village gets sufficient representation.

As has been my experience before, nothing can fully prepare you for the D-Day i.e., the actual day of the survey. We woke up at the wee hours of the day, lugged with food and water, prepared to face the excruciating heat. I along with my two team members rode on our bikes for an hour to a nondescript village called Bhakhamau. As we met each stakeholder, from pradhan to a doctor, each lamented about the growing heap of plastic in their area, the apathy of their political leader and their own helplessness to do much. While we got full support to do the survey, many a times, the conversation would steer towards pandemic, the unemployment of youth in the village and a *mela* that was in the works after a wait of 2 years. The one sight that startled me, which is common in urban India, is the blatant divide between prosperity and poverty that seemed to coexist in that village, wherein on one side of the *talab*, we saw *pucca* houses with one vehicle or two, on the other side we saw people living in *jhopdis*. Maybe this is a discussion on the anvil for another time and another article.

Author: Oshin Lakhani, Pratham