

August 21, 2024

## The Default Solution to Waste Disposal is Worsening India's Garbage Crisis

By: Ankur Bisen

*"The state needs to show more accountability and imagination towards governance and citizens need to sober up and think through the reason for which they cast their votes, if we have to rescue ourselves from being hostages that we are to open landfills."*

In December 2023, the National Green Tribunal summoned the commissioners of Gurugram and Faridabad for defying its orders on dumping garbage at the Bandhwari landfill site in the Aravallis. Waste has long overflowed the site's capacity and the tribunal wanted the existing waste at the landfill safely disposed before resuming fresh dumping. The two cities had done little to implement the order, prompting the summons.

The administrations of the two cities were willing to defy the tribunal's direction because of the paucity of sites that can absorb the daily dispatch of more than 2,000 metric tonnes (MT) of waste that comprises everything from dog faeces in polythene bags to empty wafer packs and from sanitary napkins to egg shells. For urban administrations, it is easier to continue to dump into an open landfill than refuse from a consumption binge that epitomises our country's economic progress, than find alternatives to comply with the law.

Waste needs to be viewed as a resource that should be processed at scale for its immense calorific and resource recovery potential, which cannot be done at the level of the municipality.

A related drama has been unfolding in Bhalswa Dairy in north Delhi and the open landfill next to it. Fifty years ago, people were allotted plots in the area for dairy businesses and thirty years ago, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi identified an adjacent plot of land as a site to dumping generated waste for the city. Over time, the landfill took on a towering height and began to bother both the residents of the area and the state, but for very different reasons.

The residents want the landfill removed as it poses a threat to their health and livelihood, whereas the state wants the residents to leave the area because it is hazardous to live near the landfill and for their cattle to feed on the waste.

To avoid just such a scenario playing out in the future, more than a dozen villages near the Umkhen river in Meghalaya have opposed the state government's plan to set up a new landfill at Lumsohlait in Nonghali, East Khasi Hills district. They fear it will pollute the river, which is a vital source of water for the communities.

\*\*\*

Open landfills are often the default option to dispose waste in the developing world, including in India. In the past, they rarely sparked furore over fires, collapses and stench, because they handled significantly lesser volumes and comprised mostly simpler and more degradable waste than they do today. For instance, Delhi-National Capital Region in 2024 generated nearly five times the waste made of complex chemicals that it generated in 2000, yet relies on the same open landfills that it did more than two decades ago.

Barring a few exceptions, open landfills proudly showcase the extent of the Indian state's surrender. Municipal administrators cannot do much more than providing quick fixes for a problem that is well beyond the combined might of their individual intellect and the collective capacity of the municipal body. Bureaucrats with an average tenure of two years, cannot be expected to provide all-round leadership to conceive, build, and implement projects. Gurugram's sanitation budget for 2023-24 Rs 500 crores, but only half of it was spent, despite the city's chronic struggle with the issue.

Neither do we see the local bodies freed-up from their responsibilities to dispose the waste, nor is there any evidence of institutional capacity within the state to look at the issue of waste disposal from the lens of infrastructure.

Bureaucrats also do not have the tools, the administrative bandwidth, or the state's mentorship to manage the magnitude of increasing waste generation. Take the Kanwar Yatra of 2023, during which two-week period Haridwar generated 30,000 MT of waste. For context,

the entirety of Delhi-NCR generates nearly 15,000 MT of waste per day. To expect the local administration of a district that generates just 30 MT on a normal day to address this colossal issue is a monumental ask. Therefore, they resort to open landfills that can temporarily stow the problem and kick the can down the road. Open landfills are administratively convenient; they do not require capital, accountability, or compliance. A landmass that can absorb untreated and unsegregated waste of the city free of cost, without the hassle of segregation, end-user responsibility, traceability, resource recovery, scrutiny and repercussion is a no-brainer for anyone who is tasked to manage it.

The state's lack of capacity in garbage management rarely makes or breaks political fortunes. This gives the state a free pass and ethics, and concern for public health and the environment take a back seat for the sake of the state, which needs to be seen as always being in control of the situation. Perversity is the outcome of such a bind.

Sample this for instance. Faridabad's administrators thought it appropriate to pulverise plastic waste and sprinkle the pellets around the Aravallis. However, the Supreme Court, a few weeks later, while hearing on different matter concerning disposal of plastic waste observed "The dumping of plastic is causing serious environmental degradation and is also impacting aquatic life upon riverbanks and water bodies in the country". An action deemed fit by the executive is called out as deeply problematic by the judiciary.

\*\*\*

Open landfills emit methane and other toxins into the air which play havoc with atmospheric temperature and air quality index and produce a leachate that seeps into the ground, causing irreparable damage to the soil and ground water in the vicinity. Therefore, open landfills are now seen as rudimentary, archaic, and an environmentally unfriendly method to dispose waste. As the nature of waste changed from benign refuse to toxic and non-biodegradable matter, European countries began banning them from the mid 1980s.

The changing nature of waste led First World countries make another shift to manage waste. It divested local bodies from their responsibility to dispose waste and created the industrial infrastructure to process waste.

The premise was simple. If the generated waste was increasingly a mix of complex chemicals, it needed engineering solutions beyond the capability of local municipal bodies. Local administrators now became customers of waste management infrastructure. They negotiated terms of engagement and outcome with their respective vendor partners, rather than figure out fresh sites for new open landfills. The shift saw the emergence of waste processing industry and of solutions like closed landfills, methane harvesters, material recovery centres, waste-to-energy plants at such a scale and precision that Sweden today imports waste from other countries to process it for profit.

India urgently needs a similar policy transition. The responsibility to dispose waste needs to be up-streamed from municipal local bodies and create state-level institutional capacity to manage garbage. Any other intervention, no matter how well intentioned, is sure to miss its mark.

India views waste management as the responsibility of marginalised Dalits. This inherent bias prevents us from any scientific criticism of the issue.

We need to treat waste disposal akin to generating electricity. If local bodies are not tasked to generate their own electricity, they should not be expected to dispose collected waste. Waste needs to be viewed as a resource that should be processed at scale for its immense calorific and resource recovery potential, which cannot be done at the level of the municipality. Divesting this responsibility from local bodies will free them to focus collection of waste and enforcement of waste management rules.

To make this transition, state-level waste disposal institutions need to aggregate and process waste collected from all the cities and towns within it. A state waste disposal board would define the rules, lay down terms of the trade, and spell out the associated risks, guidelines, and procedures. The board would mediate between local bodies and waste processing companies, negotiate funding from multilateral financing agencies to underwrite price discovery for waste disposal contracts, and finance local bodies to help them enter such disposal contracts.

Without such interventions, municipal bodies will forever remain compelled to dump waste in open landfills and creating carcinogenic hills out of them. With reforms, though, the waste disposal sector can be nurtured with new capital formation and see wider participation from waste disposal specialists, either private or government sponsored. A hemmed-in state like Delhi, need not to seek a waste disposal solution within its boundaries. A state-level waste disposal board could enter into an agreement with its counterpart in,

say, Rajasthan, and Delhi’s waste could be hauled in railway wagons to a methane harvesting and waste-to-energy plant in that state.

\*\*\*

The Union Budget for 2024-25 mentions solid waste management once to propose addressing this issue in 100 large cities through multi-lateral financing agencies. A decade ago, when the government announced its smart cities mission amidst much fanfare, the promised 100 smart cities were to have smart garbage management. This has not yet come to be.

Is the latest Budget announcement a silent acknowledgement that the previous effort to address the issue have not yielded the desired results? That being the case, what has changed from the past that makes us believe that the fresh claim will be successful? Neither do we see the local bodies freed-up from their responsibilities to dispose the waste, nor is there any evidence of institutional capacity within the state to look at the issue of waste disposal from the lens of infrastructure.

India views waste management as the responsibility of marginalised Dalits. This inherent bias prevents us from any scientific criticism of the issue. We continue to do more of the same, expecting a different outcome. Open landfills have been acceptable both to the executive and the society, and both seek no more than a minor tweaking, such as searching for a new landfill site, instead of rebelling against the very idea, one that disfigures the environment and biodiversity of the nation and grossly violates the right of every Indian to clean air and surroundings. They need to be called out as a habit of a nation that normalises mediocrity. What else can explain their omnipresence in our country, while similar arrangements are viewed with disdain and contempt in countries we secretly envy? The state needs to show more accountability and imagination towards governance and citizens need to sober up and think through the reason for which they cast their votes, if we have to rescue ourselves from being hostages that we are to open landfills.

*Ankur Bisen is with Technopak Advisors, and the author of Wasted: The Messy Story of Sanitation in India, A Manifesto for Change (Macmillan, 2019)*