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Cleaning up the Mess: The Need for a Waste Management Policy

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(The editorial is based on the article "Cleaning up the Mess: The Need for a Waste Management Policy" which appeared in The Hindu for 8th April, 2019. In this editorial we'll see what are the biggest problems facing waste management in the country.)

In India, less than 60% of waste is collected from households and only 15% of urban waste is processed. **India needs a waste management policy that stresses the need for *decentralised garbage disposal practices*.**

The focus here is on the words 'decentralised' and 'disposal'. We have to not only safely dispose our waste but also do it in a manner that is decentralised or locally adaptable and sustainable. Waste disposal techniques that work in Kashmir for example, may not work in the North East, and we have to adapt accordingly.

The 42nd amendment to the Indian Constitution that was adopted in 1976, and came into effect on 3 January 1977, dictated the state to protect and improve the environment to safeguard public health, forests, and wildlife.

The Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 47) in the Constitution require not only that the state protects the environment, but also that it improves polluted environments.

Waste Management in India falls under the purview of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC). In 2016 this ministry released the Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules, 2016.

Key Points

- **Hyperconsumption*** is a curse of our modern times.

- Humans generate monumental amounts of waste, a sizeable portion of which is disposed in landfills and through waste-to-energy incinerators. However, billions of tonnes of garbage, including **microplastics** [small plastic pieces less than five millimeters long], never make it to landfills or incinerators and end up in the oceans. This garbage chokes marine life and disturbs zooplankton, which are vital to the elimination of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.
- **Landfills are seedbeds of methane** and other greenhouse gases, which contribute to global warming. These toxic chemicals poison the soil and their leached run-off makes its way into the oceans. And while they do generate energy, **waste incinerators cause health issues such as cancer.**
- **In India, nearly 60% of the household waste is wet organic waste, with low calorific value. This makes options such as waste-to-energy incinerators inefficient. We need to design incinerators that are suited to Indian conditions.**

It does seem overwhelming, but **there are solutions to the garbage pandemic through the crucial processes of material recycling and composting.**

Efficient composting* is possible through an optimal combination of microbes and temperature to produce a nutrient-dense soil conditioner.

***Hyperconsumerism** refer to the consumption of goods for non-functional purposes and the associated significant pressure to consume those goods exerted by the modern, capitalist society, as those goods shape one's identity.

***Composting** is the process that speeds up decomposition of organic materials by providing ideal conditions for microorganisms to thrive.

There are several problems in India in how waste is treated:

- **Segregation of waste into organic, recyclable and hazardous categories is not enforced at source.** As a result, mixed waste lands up in the landfills, where waste-pickers, in hazardous conditions, try to salvage the recyclables, which are of poor quality and quantity by then.
- Ideally, **waste management should not be offered free of cost to residents.** Only if residents pay will they realise the importance of segregation and recycling.
- **There is also the issue of logistical contractors who are motivated to dump more garbage in landfills as their compensation is proportional to the tonnage of waste.** They are also prone to illegally dump waste at unauthorised sites to reduce transportation costs.
- Lastly but importantly, **organic farming and composting are not economically attractive to the Indian farmer, as chemical pesticides are heavily subsidised, and the compost is not efficiently marketed.**

Way Forward

- We need a comprehensive waste management policy that stresses the need for decentralised garbage disposal practices as this will **incentivise private players to participate**.
- To overhaul the waste management sector and induce the necessary behavioural change, **citizen participation and engagement is the key**.
- Building appropriate institutional framework along with policy-level directions will also help facilitate the necessary change.
- Finally, concerns such as these are to be addressed if our greatest existential challenge, climate change, has to be tackled effectively.

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