



Stop the waste from burying us: State or society is usually blamed, but let's look upstream at producers of waste

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Rohini Nilekani in [TOI Edit Page](#) | [Edit Page](#), [Environment](#), [India](#) | [TOI](#)

You cannot walk or drive more than a few metres in any Indian city without encountering mounds of rubbish. Even in our villages, you will find garbage billowing around fields, piling up along roads or even lining the forest floor. At many beaches, you are as likely to find your toes tickled by strands of plastic as by little fish.

It is no longer possible to look away.

India's waste problem is gigantic, and with its economy growing steadily, it will be compounded manifold. Yet, our waste stream management has not even got off the ground.

Swachh Bharat and all its predecessors are welcome initiatives of the government. Recently amended rules for e-waste and plastic waste management, which include many forward-looking ideas, are critically important.

Yet there is little ability to implement these policies or follow up on performance goals. Much of the mandate rests with the Pollution Control Boards, or local governments, which have inadequate resources and staff, and not enough power to pursue offenders.



Illustration: Uday Deb

When we think of waste stream management, we often think of downstream solutions. Citizens must consume less; they must use eco-friendly products; they must segregate garbage at source; and they must compost wet waste. Local governments must do more, faster and more efficiently to collect and treat garbage, but not in my backyard (NIMBY).

Slowly but surely, the primary responsibility for reducing and managing waste has moved to the state (sarkaar) and to society (samaaj). But what of the market (bazaar)? Not so long ago, the onus was shared by producers. Remember when fizzy drinks or milk would come in glass bottles and be picked up for reuse? Cheap plastics and a use-and-throw culture changed all that. But we must swing the pendulum back, and quickly.

Let's look clearly upstream – to the producers of this waste. The spotlight must shine on companies that manufacture all the products and create all the services that we use.

For far too long, they have been allowed to privatise the profits that come from an expanding economy and socialise the costs of managing the generated waste. The fortune of the bottom of the pyramid might have been realised by companies and their shareholders, but the people at the bottom of the pyramid have been left to cope with the detritus of that fortune.

Things will probably get worse, not better, unless producer responsibility is taken seriously. With India going digital, we have a massive and dangerous e-waste problem. India has the dubious distinction of being one among the top five countries in e-waste generation. Recycling does harvest valuable metals from this waste, but not enough, and the rest is highly toxic, leaching into the ground and water bodies.

Or take e-commerce, the newest sunrise industry in India. Online retail is estimated to grow to \$200 billion by 2026, up from just \$15 billion in 2016. Yet, the true cost of packaging is not factored in market pricing mechanisms, so companies have zero financial incentive to choose more sustainable options.

Now think of women and babies and their legitimate hygiene needs. In 2014, market penetration for disposable diapers was only 7.6%. Diaper sales are predicted to double by 2020. Similarly, the penetration rate of the sanitary napkins market is expected to grow to 42% from the current 24%.

With just these examples, imagine the tonnes of packaging and toxic waste that will accompany this growth. Now think where all that styrofoam, cardboard, plastic and metal will land. Dwell on the public health and environmental hazards that are the inescapable result.

Unmanageable waste has turned into a worldwide crisis. No matter how much local authorities do, no matter the level of public cooperation, no matter how much is recycled, the problem continues to grow.

The only real solution is to encourage massive innovation in the production of stuff the world uses. Production of everything must be re-imagined. It has to weigh less; be made of more earth friendly material; be easy to disassemble and recycle; use less packaging, and so on.

India can be a leader in this movement. It has already moved ahead in fuel emission standards for the automobile sector, by announcing the adoption of BS-VI norms by 2020.

We can be inspired by and renew our ancient culture of sustainable design and living. Why not set standards for producers and importers of all goods and services sold in India? This would fuel R&D investments and give a whole new energy to what Make in India means.

If companies do not get ahead of the curve, sanctions are inevitable. Coca Cola has read the writing on the wall. Greenpeace estimated that the beverage giant produced 110 billion throwaway plastic bottles in 2015. Most of these go to landfills or to the ocean. Owning up to its responsibility, the company recently announced that it would make all its packaging recyclable by 2030.

This is laudable but we have to push further. Public opinion must form around this issue, for it affects us all. Why can't production materials and packaging be fully reinvented? There is already exciting research into new materials that are greener or that disintegrate.

We need to incentivise such innovation. Or bring out a policy stick. Only then is there hope that a country that aspires to democratise abundance will not first be buried in its own waste.

DISCLAIMER : Views expressed above are the author's own.

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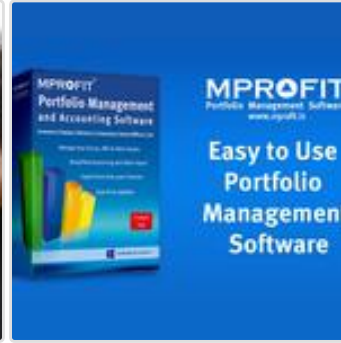
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