IJARSCT
International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology
International Open-Access, Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Multidisciplinary Online Journal
ISSN: 2581-9429
Volume 6, Issue 5, July 2026
Impact Factor: 8.2

Impacts of Municipal Solid Waste and Urban Waste Management Practices in India

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Abstract: *Municipal solid waste (MSW) has become one of the major environmental and urban-management challenges in India because of rapid urbanization, population growth, changing consumption patterns, industrial development and expansion of cities. Increasing quantities of household, commercial and institutional waste place considerable pressure on urban local bodies responsible for collection, transportation, treatment and disposal. The impacts of inappropriate municipal waste management extend beyond visible litter and include air pollution, groundwater contamination, soil degradation, greenhouse-gas emissions, unpleasant odours, vector proliferation and risks to public health. Studies published between 2010 and 2022 indicate that many Indian cities continued to experience deficiencies in source segregation, collection efficiency, scientific treatment, recycling and sanitary disposal. Open dumping and poorly managed landfill sites have been particularly important sources of environmental degradation.*

Keywords: Municipal Solid Waste, Urban Waste Management, Environmental Pollution, Recycling, Landfill, Public Health, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Municipal solid waste management is a fundamental component of sustainable urban development because the quantity and complexity of waste generated by cities increase alongside population, urbanization, economic activity and changes in consumption behaviour. In India, rapid urban expansion has created substantial pressure on municipal authorities to provide regular collection, transportation, treatment and disposal services. Gupta et al. (2015) describe MSW management as a major environmental issue in India and identify rapid urbanization, industrialization and population growth as important drivers of increasing waste generation. The authors further emphasize that inadequate management can generate environmental, health and socioeconomic consequences.

The environmental consequences of municipal waste depend strongly on how waste is stored, collected, transported, processed and finally disposed of. When biodegradable, recyclable and hazardous materials are mixed, opportunities for material recovery are reduced and the environmental burden of subsequent treatment increases. Open dumping and uncontrolled disposal can produce leachate, contaminate soil and water resources, release methane and other gases through decomposition, and create conditions favourable for insects, rodents and other disease vectors. Reviews of Indian waste-management systems have therefore identified source segregation, efficient collection, scientific treatment and controlled disposal as interconnected requirements for reducing environmental impacts (Gupta et al., 2015; Nandan et al., 2017).

Urban waste management also has a significant climate dimension. Organic fractions deposited in anaerobic landfill environments generate methane, while open burning can release particulate matter and other pollutants. At the same time, recycling and recovery can reduce the demand for virgin materials and energy-intensive production. Sharma et al. (2019) argue that integrated municipal solid waste management involving composting, anaerobic digestion, recycling, waste-to-energy and sanitary landfilling can reduce the environmental burden associated with uncontrolled disposal. Their review emphasizes the value of life-cycle assessment for comparing alternative waste-management scenarios.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this review is to examine the impacts of municipal solid waste and urban waste-management practices in India using literature published mainly during 2010–2022. The study specifically examines the environmental effects of inappropriate waste disposal, the consequences of urban waste-management practices for public health and urban communities, the role of collection and segregation systems, the importance of recycling and resource recovery, and the institutional and technological challenges affecting sustainable municipal waste management.

METHODOLOGY

The study follows a review-based research methodology. Published research articles, review papers and official environmental-management materials relating to municipal solid waste management in India were examined, with emphasis on the period 2010–2022. The literature was organized thematically around waste generation, collection, transportation, segregation, recycling, treatment, landfill disposal, environmental pollution, health effects, climate impacts and sustainable management strategies. Particular attention was given to peer-reviewed studies addressing Indian cities and to literature examining the implementation and implications of the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016. The review approach makes it possible to identify recurring environmental and institutional problems and to synthesize potential management strategies.

MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE GENERATION AND URBANIZATION

Rapid urbanization has substantially increased the quantity of municipal waste generated by Indian cities. Urban households, markets, restaurants, offices, educational institutions and commercial establishments produce heterogeneous waste streams consisting of biodegradable materials, plastics, paper, metals, glass, textiles and other materials. The composition and quantity of MSW vary according to income, consumption patterns, population density, climate and local economic activity. Gupta et al. (2015) note that changes in population, income, lifestyle and urban development influence both the quantity and characteristics of municipal waste.

The growing quantity of waste creates challenges for municipalities because collection and disposal infrastructure does not always expand at the same rate as urban development. When collection systems are insufficient, waste may accumulate in streets, vacant plots, drains and water bodies. Such accumulation affects urban aesthetics and can obstruct drainage systems, particularly during rainfall. Nandan et al. (2017) and related reviews identify inadequate infrastructure, weak segregation and deficiencies in municipal capacity as important challenges to sustainable MSW management in India.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE

Improper municipal solid waste management affects almost every component of the urban environment. One of the most important impacts is soil contamination. Waste containing plastics, metals, chemicals, batteries, paints and other potentially hazardous substances can release contaminants into surrounding soil. At poorly managed disposal sites, rainfall may transport dissolved and suspended contaminants into the surrounding environment. Nandan et al. (2017) emphasize that land disposal can produce environmental and socioeconomic consequences, while more recent reviews identify soil and water pollution as major risks associated with poorly controlled waste disposal.

Water pollution is another important consequence.

Decomposing organic matter produces leachate containing dissolved organic substances, nutrients and potentially harmful contaminants. Where landfill engineering and leachate-control systems are inadequate, leachate can enter surface water or groundwater. Consequently, waste-management facilities located close to settlements, agricultural areas and water resources may create environmental risks if appropriate containment and monitoring systems are not provided.

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Air pollution occurs through several pathways. Open burning of mixed municipal waste can release particulate matter, carbon monoxide and other combustion-related pollutants. Landfills and open dumps also generate gases during decomposition. Sharma et al. (2019) explain that uncontrolled disposal can result in toxic and greenhouse-gas emissions and argue that integrated management can reduce the landfill burden.

IMPACTS ON PUBLIC HEALTH

Poor waste management can create direct and indirect risks to human health. Accumulated waste provides food and breeding habitats for flies, mosquitoes, rodents and other vectors. Uncontrolled waste burning can expose nearby populations to smoke and particulate pollution. Workers involved in collection, sorting and disposal may also face occupational exposure to sharp objects, contaminated materials, dust, biological agents and hazardous substances when appropriate protective equipment and operational procedures are absent.

The health burden is particularly relevant for communities living near open dumps and poorly managed landfill sites. Gupta et al. (2015) identify public-health risks as one of the important consequences of inadequate MSW management. Waste-management workers and informal waste pickers can face additional risks because they frequently handle mixed waste manually. Consequently, occupational safety, protective equipment, health monitoring and formal integration of waste workers should be considered components of sustainable urban waste management.

WASTE COLLECTION AND TRANSPORTATION PRACTICES

Collection and transportation constitute major operational components of municipal solid waste management. Efficient door-to-door collection can prevent waste accumulation and increase the possibility of source segregation. However, the effectiveness of collection depends on municipal infrastructure, vehicle availability, route planning, workforce capacity, financial resources and citizen participation.

Gupta et al. (2015) reported that collection systems in Indian cities have historically been characterized by organizational and infrastructural deficiencies. Poorly designed collection systems can also increase transportation costs and fuel consumption. Therefore, route optimization, appropriate vehicle selection, transfer stations and decentralized processing facilities can improve operational efficiency.

Transportation practices also have environmental implications. Long-distance transport of mixed waste increases fuel consumption and emissions. Decentralized composting, material recovery facilities and localized processing can reduce the volume requiring long-distance transport. Integrated systems should therefore consider the complete chain from waste generation to final disposal rather than focusing only on the final landfill.

WASTE-TO-ENERGY AND RESOURCE RECOVERY

Waste-to-energy technologies have received considerable attention as cities seek alternatives to conventional disposal. These technologies include incineration, refuse-derived fuel, anaerobic digestion and other thermochemical or biochemical processes. Their environmental performance depends strongly on waste composition, moisture content, segregation, technology selection, emission-control systems and energy recovery efficiency.

The literature does not support a single universal treatment technology for all municipal waste. Life-cycle assessment studies show that the environmental performance of waste-management alternatives varies according to local conditions and the composition of waste. Integrated systems combining prevention, reuse, recycling, biological treatment, energy recovery and controlled landfilling can therefore be more appropriate than reliance on a single technology.

INSTITUTIONAL AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

Urban waste management is not merely a technical problem; it is also an institutional and governance challenge. Municipal bodies require adequate finance, trained personnel, equipment, planning capacity, monitoring mechanisms

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and reliable data. The implementation of waste-management rules can also vary among cities because of differences in institutional capacity.

The 2020 review of Indian cities identifies poor policy implementation, inadequate assessment, weak fiscal planning and insufficient public participation as important barriers. These findings indicate that regulatory frameworks need to be accompanied by effective enforcement, institutional coordination and financial mechanisms.

The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 represented an important regulatory development by emphasizing source segregation, collection, processing and scientific disposal. CPCB's reporting framework also provides a mechanism for monitoring implementation by urban local bodies and state authorities. However, the effectiveness of regulation ultimately depends on implementation at the municipal level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature demonstrates that the impacts of municipal solid waste in India are multidimensional. Environmentally, uncontrolled dumping and inadequate landfill management are associated with soil, water and air pollution, greenhouse-gas emissions and degradation of urban ecosystems. Socially, unmanaged waste reduces neighbourhood cleanliness and can disproportionately affect communities and workers located near disposal sites. From a public-health perspective, inadequate waste collection and disposal can increase exposure to vectors, smoke, contaminated materials and occupational hazards.

The literature also demonstrates that management practices strongly determine the magnitude of these impacts. Mixed waste collection limits recycling and biological treatment, whereas source segregation increases opportunities for recovery. Open dumping creates greater environmental risks than engineered disposal. Similarly, centralized systems may require substantial transportation, whereas decentralized treatment can reduce transportation demand for suitable waste streams.

A consistent finding across the literature is that technological solutions alone cannot resolve India's urban waste-management challenges. Effective implementation requires municipal finance, institutional capacity, public participation, private-sector involvement, integration of informal waste workers, reliable data and enforcement of regulations. Gupta et al. (2015) identified institutional and financial limitations as important constraints, while later reviews continued to identify inadequate policy implementation and public participation as significant challenges.

II. CONCLUSION

Municipal solid waste has become a major environmental and urban-management concern in India. Rapid urbanization and changing consumption patterns have increased the quantity and complexity of waste, while many urban areas continue to experience deficiencies in segregation, collection, treatment and scientific disposal. The consequences include soil and water contamination, air pollution, greenhouse-gas emissions, public-health risks, land-use pressure and deterioration of urban environmental quality. Evidence from studies published between 2010 and 2022 indicates that integrated municipal solid waste management offers a pathway for reducing these impacts. Source segregation, recycling, composting, anaerobic digestion, appropriate waste-to-energy technologies and sanitary landfilling should operate as interconnected components rather than isolated solutions. Effective governance, municipal capacity, public participation and integration of informal waste workers are equally important. The long-term objective should be to move Indian cities from a linear “collect–transport–dump” model toward a resource-efficient and circular urban waste-management system.

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