

Household Solid Waste Segregation – a case of India

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Abstract

In the process of ‘restless formation and reformation of landscape’, to use Soja’s coinage, ‘solid waste finds its geographical loci in a special context of time, space and the social being’. (Nath et al, 2018, p.1348). Juxtaposing Foucault’s statement of “Space treated as dead, fixed, undialectical, immobile and time on the contrary as rich, fecundity, life, and dialectic”, NIMBY (Not in My Back Courtyard) happens to be the thumb rule of Solid Waste Disposal. If one takes Foucault’s conviction of present epoch as above all the epoch of SPACE i.e. the epoch of simultaneity, epoch of near and far, of side by side, of the dispersed, then MSWM (Municipal Solid Waste Management), enjoining the intertextuality of “social production of space and the restless reformation of geographical landscapes, social being emplaced in space and time in an explicitly historical and geographical

contextualisation, calls for action on “why and how it (solid waste) is created in the very first place and how soon it is to be disposed of, as much as it is spatiality: that is where it is created and where it is disposed of”. If the creation of solid waste is a gift of the modernisation process, then mountain-like landfills are the best symbol of postmodern architectural and sculptural design available in every urban settlement of the Global South. The present paper struggles to untie the camouflaged grid of

Swachh Bharat Mission – Urban 2.0, in the framework of SWM Rules 2016 (India), with a single pivot of segregation of SW by the generator. Segregation by generator (as per SWM Rules 2016) straddles the grand canvas of the narrative of urban local governance, with formal adherence to

rule of law on the one hand, and the process of negotiation, mediation, and bargaining by the household Solid Waste generator in their behavioural architecture in solid waste disposal

practices on the other.

Keywords: SM Rules 2016 and 2025, Segregation, Gurugram, NIMBY

JEL Classification: Q53

Introduction

A Case of the Rule of the Jungle

Plot No - 666, Sector- 38, Gurugram, Owner – Shri Gopal Singh, IES, Retd

“There was a two-and-a-half-story building (as per the provision of 2004, HUDA, to construct 60% of the area of the total for the ground floor and 1st floor, for the 2nd floor, one is permitted to only ½ of the same, i.e. nearly 30 % of the total area. After enjoying rental income for more than a decade, I rented out to a property dealer who was running a PG there. In Oct 2024, he started the demolition works to construct a new building with a basement, stilt parking, and a four-storey building on the same plot 266 (area 264 yards), at Plot no 266, Sector- 38, Gurugram. Apart from the nuisance caused by the high-decibel sounds produced, the construction and demolition waste (with its dust particles) littered has made life hell for the 13 other plots’ inmates, where construction has been completed, and people are staying. This is one of the cases where there is a complete violation of any of the rules of construction works, its timing and the damage caused to other adjacent assets, public utilities like sewerage system in place, road-network developed by the local authority.”

Photo Plot No - 666, Sector- 38, Gurugram, Owner – Shri Gopal Singh, IES, Retd



C and D Waste.



Construction workers build makeshift houses during construction work

In the present paper, an attempt is made to understand the nuances of the interface of *governance, law and economics*, how they are played out in the game of solid waste segregation by the generator mandated by the Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rule, 2016. The paper is based on the following framework.

Epistemology	Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Methods
Constructivism	Postmodernism	Survey Research	Questionnaire
		Ethnography	Focus Group Discussion
			In-depth Interview

This paper relies on the materials of two PhD Works (Luthra, 2015 and Nath, 2023), citing the following discourse narratives through their exploratory research. The saga of local governance until the neoliberal agenda was unleashed by the NEP in 1991 has its truncated, biased formulation of urban development as a vehicle of the modernisation process per se and economic growth in particular, dating back to European Industrialisation. If the epistemology of modernisation is founded on the bedrock of colonisation and the division of the global land mass among different modern states of Europe, which is the metanarrative of Global North, the clamour for independence and following the path of development and growth trajectory as manoeuvred and manufactured by the West with grand epilogues of CAPITALISM, Marxism, Socialism, Mixed economy became the harbinger of the postwar new world order. But the bane of civilizational path vides ‘civilising the savages’ or the “unhindered and unscrupulous exploitation and expropriation of mother earth’s resources” had more than its fair share for the Global South than their counterparts in the North (Solid

Waste Management is one such bane). In this backdrop, post-NEP neoliberalism has new challenges of setting those *ceteris paribus* conditions of neo-Keynesian neoclassical economics in order.

SWM RULE 2016 and 2024– A paradigm shift in INDIA:

Having ushered in a paradigm shift in fixing the responsibility of the generator for primary segregation (that is, household as generator or anyone else like the bulk waste generator, etc.), and deletion of the term “MUNICIPAL” as is and was prevalent in global solid waste literature, the typical manifestation of legal framework in its non-compliance or violation, which has been the characteristics of a Soft State (Myrdal, 1972) has been attempted with some ramifications vide SWM Rules 2024 to be in force since 1 October 2025.

The following cosmetic changes, like

- i) extending the territorial implication of the law to the whole of India,
- ii) defining a large manufacturing unit to be with an investment of more than twenty crore,
- iii) earmarking the municipal authorities mandated to collect segregated solid waste and further processing like collection, transportation till final disposal vide re-use, re-cycle and use in waste-energy plant, for segregation, from a three-fold classification to a multifold one like organic, inorganic, biodegradable, non- non-biodegradable, recyclable, non-recyclable and hazardous waste,
- iv) earmarking responsibility to different hierarchies of administration (various Departments)

have been undertaken in the midst of postmodern post-truth narratives, vide *Swachh Bharat Mission – Urban 2.0, in the framework of SWM Rules 2016 (India)*.

In this grid of techno-legal regime, on the one hand, conjoined with the techno-financial regime on the other, the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of SWM Rules takes the path of a hyper reality construction through Swachh Bharat Sarvekshyan and the path of least resistance (Krishna, 2017) co-opted by urban local authorities.

Objectivist epistemology vs Social Constructionism

In the absence of some meaningful reality for Solid Waste outside the purview of human consciousness, objectivist epistemology is rejected and substituted by constructivism. With common-sensical pedagogy that no lump of waste is waiting to find a meaning by human beings, the objectivist view of “what it means to know about the solid waste” and find the value and understandings of the same as objectified in people is rejected here, as is done by most of the research studies.

The existing angle of human knowledge (any objective truth about Solid Waste is waiting for us, i.e. by the generator of Solid Waste to be discovered), obfuscates the multiple realities and multiple truths that Solid Waste portrays, meaning and truth about solid waste come into

existence when one engages with it in relation to the realities of our world. The meaning of solid waste has not been discovered; rather, it has been constructed.

In this understanding of knowledge, different people may construct different meanings about solid waste (as per the 2016 rule, which made segregation a mandatory function) in different ways with regard to the same phenomenon. Moreover, they may construct different meanings in two different timelines: pre-COVID and post-COVID, as has been attempted in the study of household solid waste segregation Practices in GURUGRAM (Nath, 2023). The study (Nath, 2023) conducted in two time zones (pre-COVID and during COVID) and taking a spatial detour in the sector area, that is, sector 38 and sector 39 and the nearby localities of Islampur & Jhadsa (which are the urbanised villages; (still dubbed as village though situated in the heart of the millennium town in GURUGRAM), attempts to delimit the epistemological obstacle from a narrow techno-economic approach (Bachelard,1984). cited in Corvellec, 2025. p-3) to Waste, thereby extending our understanding of waste production in the larger social contexts of extraction, production, consumption, and disposal of solid waste (Liboiron and Lepawsky, 2022). The fact that social sciences and the humanities approach waste as part of ‘wider systems, structures and cultures of waste and wasting’ in comparison to engineering, the natural sciences, and economics (Liboiron 2018, 1), the interface of two cultural milieus, their intersections and veritable transactions vis-à-vis the structure of governance in the study subverts the techno-economic understanding of waste, and boldly attempts to explore an alternative regime of waste consequential from the current modes of extraction, production, distribution, consumption and disposal concomitant with the imaginaries formed from narratives and discourse, the standard benchmark of valuation, and routines – all attached to them (Corvellec, 2025.p-3). As Gille (2007) charts the waste regime’s course “from a sociocultural historic analysis of waste politics in social and post-socialist Hungary” (Corvellec, 2025. p - 4) and reframes waste as a “Social Category” which extends beyond the technical into symbolic, institutional, political and cultural realms essential to society, the study (Nath, 2023) ventures into the unexplored area of Hindu Fascist agenda of weaponizing solid waste disposal practices as a means to “define the other” (Stanley, 2015.p.114-115).

Construct from Individual to Group Manifesting in Practices:

Here, the intentionality of the interpreter (the generator of solid waste) plays a vital role, and accordingly, the practice differs from person to person and also of the same person in different time dimensions, irrespective of people operating under the same umbrella of Rule of Law, as handed down to them from above. How the respondents (generator of the waste) receive the knowledge (or become aware) about segregation from the medium that the benevolent sovereign authority exposes them to determines in the crucial path of formation of narrative interpretations of the same in relation to his surroundings and develops his attitude and constructs his mediation of the problem with interface from different agencies, and finally that

gets reflected in his practice towards segregation and that has been attempted to be captured here (Nath, 2023) How the respondents construct these practices is a dynamic one. The continuous variation that he undergoes and the causes thereof have been analysed in this research study. (Nath, 2023. p. 54)

The Rules 2016, though fixed in terms of its language and compliance of it of mandatory nature, the authority constructs different strategies in different timelines, to quote Krishna (2020), “policy following the least resistance one” (Krishna, 2020, p. 95).

This opens up the possibility of an objective understanding of solid waste to be safely substituted by multiple layers of meaning with utilitarian functions. Neo-classical economics, nesting in St Thomas Aquinas’s (1947) separationist interpolations of the Christian Bible, subscribes to man’s dominion over all external things (Corvellec, 2025). (p.2) ran through the millennial tradition of a seasonal circular economy of FARMING, a system where nothing was discarded. This contrasts sharply with the finite, linear model of extraction, production distribution with ultimate consumption (Corvellec, 2025, p. 3 as it’s end purely for organic pleasure seeking beyond the precinct of “DHARMA” as is understood in the EAST (more accurately the OREINT, not the Orientalism’s passage of Said). (Saraswati,1998. P.2, Said, 2014. p.127).

The process of modernisation is based on the intensive exploitation of materials, generating CAPITAL at an exponential rate that can best be understood in the words of Rockefeller (address at Brown University a century before).

“We ought not to lament as evil the wreckage that accrues around a business. The growth of a large business is merely the survival of the fittest. The American Beauty Rose can be produced in splendour and fragrance, which bring cheer to its beholder, only by sacrificing the early buds that grow around it. This is not an evil tendency in the business. It is merely the working-out of a law of nature and a law of God.” (Tarbell (1905) cited in Altman & Kingson (2015, p.91).

The second corroboration comes from another Cambridge economist, Arthur Pigou, who proposed the “notion of externality”, the ‘wasteful exploitation of Nature’s gifts, ’ and the ‘proposal of a tax on marginal damage by industrial processes. ’ These are the epistemological biases in the West, germinating the idea of WASTE being framed as a calculative matter of benefit versus cost.

The multiple and often conflicting constructions of solid waste reject any direct verification of knowledge by comparison with constructed models elsewhere in the world. Here, the subject is free to choose between different constructions and select the correct ones. This process leads to a kind of social constructionism that manifests knowledge as a product of the social process of interaction, negotiation, and communication. (Nath, 2023, p.54)

Nature and Human Beings

The clarion call of "Think globally, act locally" way back in 1992 in Rio, (urging people to

brood over the future of our entire planet and to take appropriate action at their level be it individually or collectively) has its veritable format in 'Environmental activists' slogan - "Act Globally, act locally" which amplifies the contemporary concern activism everywhere. The back-and-forth journey of "Solid Waste" from local to global and vice versa is no longer a coffee table discourse. For the first time in history, the human being, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, is leaving behind a trail of waste (for the first time so massive and heterogeneous in its history of existence to date), desperately brooding over how to dispose of it. This became a learning point in post-COVID with the memory of Solid Waste disposal trimming into the existential crises post-lockdown and mandatory seclusion.

Even if they are called waste, they are the very matters of Mother Earth. Therefore, some or all of it can be reused, recycled, and reduced, that is, the amount of solid waste generated and collected in the first place or even re-purposed. Beyond the 3Rs, Johnson and Upham discussed the concepts of the 5Rs and 8Rs, respectively. *In his book "Zero Waste Home"*, Johnson writes "*Refuse what you do not need; reduce what you do need; reuse what you consume; recycle what you cannot refuse, reduce and reuse; or transform the rest.*" – (Johnson, B., 2013). The 5 R's are: Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and transform the rest, i.e. Repurpose. The same way Upham's 8 R's are, "Reduce, Refuse, Reuse, Re-Purpose, Repair, Recycle Right, Remove, and Rally." (*Nancy Upham, 2021*).

The not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY Not in my backyard) attitude has been deep in the human psyche as far as our approach to solid waste is concerned. Overall, our unrelenting reliance on sanitation workers to manage our waste has made the entire solid waste episode go out of our hands, nullifying any thinking about managing our waste in a decentralised manner. (Singh. A et al., 2016).

Segregation Narrative as a Media Reality in the post-modernised post-truth INDIA

"Though segregation is the most sought-after thing in every local body recently(post 2016rule), it is not taking any concrete shape at the national level. Irrespective of the mishaps here and there, the regular strictures from the court, including the Green Tribunal, have not gone to the public at large. Sporadic success stories in Indore (Source Segregation), Bhopal and Dhenkanal (Material Processing), Kakinada (Technological Innovation), Bobbili (biodegradable waste management), Gangtok (plastic waste management), Gurugram (construction and demolition waste), Pune (sanitary waste management), or any other (Biswas and Parida, 2021) may be inspiring with utility for teaching and training, but replication of each of these models in every nook and corner of the country is the task ahead that needs urgent attention. The problems of landfills and the resistance of the people nearby being affected with high health hazards and an impending disaster-like situation have accentuated the importance of segregation at the source." (Nath et al, 2018, p.1357)

"Jhadsa reveals the typical Indian City with a unique mix of Rural and Urban characters. The

typical rural character, with its ethos of daringly withstanding the urban formal adherence to the rule of law as its mainstay of governance, builds its own narrative of solid waste management and creates an extremely heterogeneous structure of solid waste disposal off the locality. Of course, the denial of provisions of basic amenities of civic life is as conspicuous, the narrative of quid pro quo relationship that seems not only pragmatic but also normative to the villagers in Jhadsa. With their indigenous knowledge still intact in the collective memory, and with the availability of open spaces within the premises of the Jhadsa village settlement area, the villagers (staying in the midst of the millennium city) suggest the principle of decentralised solid waste processing, as mentioned in the rule, 2016. They argue that the least quantity of waste needs to be transported outside for further processing, and the rest amount should be recycled with almost zero waste to the landfill. But the reality in both the urbanised villages is very disturbing. Each household respondent struggles in a particular manner in their SWM practices in their location. Each HSW generator plays the game of disposing of its waste in its own way on a specific day. NIMBY (not in my backyard) is the only thumb rule for this universe. Each household's identified segregation behaviour pattern of not segregating the waste and the philosophical edge which his discourse leads him to is not translated into the collective universal value as enshrined in the present Rule vide the nuances of local governance and dynamics of pressure group in a participatory democracy". (Nath et al, 2019, p.955).

Actor behind Segregation (Gurugram): Male Servant and Maid Servant

The material culture of identity making through consumption (vide the rise in income orchestrated by IT-led booming economy in Gurugram with many a corporate offices, with more than 250 Fortune companies (Das, 2020; Bhardwaj, 2015) has led to in production of middle-class identities and the employment of domestic help (Dickey, 2000; Ray & Qayum, 2010).

The over-dependence on domestic servants (the migrant labourers from MP, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand) having increased manifold due to modern slavery of 21st century in the guise of new paradigm set in the tertiary sector employment, manifested a new parasite class among the "digital natives' new millennials" (dubbed as Gen Y). The infrastructure development with the shining India buzzword manifested fissures in the economy when a large share of the growth cake was grabbed by the newly mushroomed middle class, truncating the private goods consumption pattern in favour of this class and the gradual withdrawal of the State from provisioning of Public Goods or Merit Goods.

The systematic decimation of the Rural economy, forcing a rural-urban migration across the country, led to a search for new pastures of additional income to suffice the agricultural and

allied sector in rural areas.

In this milieu, the Solid Waste creation and the social construction of the SWM Rule 2016 of Segregation at the generator's level can be contextualised in the format of pre-existing gender stereotypes and feminisation of the segregation of Solid Waste into dry and wet at least. Older generation opting / and preferring to segregate against the reluctance of the younger, "within the age group of 25" manifests prominently the customary prudence of reuse, recycle, repurpose and minimise the waste generation, a value systematically shattered even in the Global South, which is critically examined by Thengdi (1998).

Solid waste land fill: the unintended consequence of Modernisation

A gift to postmodern architecture and sculpture – "Case of Bandhwari" Integrated Waste Management project has been developed for the Gurugram Faridabad Cluster, and for this, Eco-green Energy Private Limited, a Chinese company, has been given the responsibility since 2017. Steps taken by Eco-green as being inadequate in so far the Bandhwari landfill is concerned, the wastes had caused a lot of damage in terms of air pollution, frequent fires affecting the life of the inhabitants and also the Wildlife sanctuary of Asola Bhati. This prominent wildlife sanctuary is home to 193 species of birds, more than 80 species of butterflies, black buck, Golden Jackal, leopards and a large number of medicinal plants.

The issue in Bandhwari is not only its legacy waste of 33 lakh MT but also the daily deposition of nearly 2000 MT. (Gurugram 1100 TPD & Faridabad 900 TPD). The processing capacity of legacy waste was 5100 TPD, and accordingly Net 3100 TPD (5100TPD - 2000 TPD = 3100 TPD) of waste was being remediated at the site (2022). The height of the dumpsite has been reduced to 38 meters in 2022 from 40 meters in 2021. (Poonam Yadav vs M/s. Eco-green Energy Private, 2022)



Bandhwari landfill site, Source: Chaman (2021).

Contextualising Soja on the decentralisation of Solid Waste disposal

“Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the other was richness, fecundity, life, dialectical”. (Foucault,1980). Soja argues that in the critical social

theorisation, concept of space and time as revealed by “Foucault” continues to find application today. (Soja,1989. P.11).

As suggested (FGD no. 5 of Sec 38, FGD No 6 of Jhadsa, and In-depth interview No 2, Nath,2023.p-217,p-227,p-244) during FGD, the folkloric understanding of solid waste, not to be transported away from the village and put in any unknown place of mother earth (which is regarded as sin) gets reverberated in the present rule of decentralization of solid waste processing and decomposition. (Appendix 4.3, FGD No 5, 6, of Jhadsa, FGD No 2,4, 5, 6 of Islampur, Nath, 2023. p-227and 228, p-237, p-239,p-240 and 241). Here, the available land in each locality (87.827 sq. yard on average) for decomposition and sorting out the solid waste for reuse and recycling plays an important role. Both urbanised villages want this to be done in the village premises, whereas both the sector areas do not want any decomposition plant within the locality. The sector area people are not ready to sacrifice the luxury of open space, park or playground and other open spaces. (Appendix 4.3, FGD No of 5, 7, 8 of Sector 38, Nath,2023. p-217, p-219, and p-220) The available unconstructed open area in each household also plays an important role in the thinking of decomposition and reuse, and recycling. Sacred places do not want any decomposition to be done within the premises.

Space available per plot

	Space available per plot
Sec 38	114.4
Islampur	76.667
Sec 39	15.834
Jhadsa	143.956
Average	87.827

Observed Rule of the Game – Mediation, Negotiation, Bargain – JUGAD: How law is compromised”

Violation of the rule of law is one of the salient features of most third-world countries, termed as “Soft State” by Gunnar Myrdal. (Myrdal, 1970, p.277), and the manifestation of the Rule of Law is in its non-compliance and truncation, the Solid Waste Management Rule 2016 has been no exception across the country. In the absence of the rule of law, this particular rule is also seriously compromised, and “juggad” of all kinds renders the violation of the rule as the norm. How the

different interest groups and pressure groups violate the basic norm of segregation and solid waste disposal, as per the 2016 Rule could not have been delineated without a series of Focus Group Discussions in each area of study in GURUGRAM.

Case of provisioning of Health Services as an alternative livelihood option

Householders who operate services related to health (labs and patients' suits) continue to break the rule in terms of mixing biomedical waste with other waste and depositing it into the waste collector. Even though the waste collectors were reluctant to take the biomedical waste, even during the pre-COVID period, this particular group compelled the waste collectors to take their waste. By paying a high sum, they negotiate, or using their link with both political and bureaucratic personnel, they mediate the violation of the rule and send their biomedical waste to the final destination of the landfill area in Bandhwari. "Paisa Pheko Tamasha Dekho" (Throw money and then enjoy the tricks of the trade) kind of conviction arises in an environment where people are accustomed to "Harassment bribe" Harassment bribes. (Basu, 2011). "Harassment bribe is that people often have to give to get what they are legally entitled to". Basu, 2011. p.4)

Provisioning of Paying Guest (PG) Accommodation as an additional source of income:

The huge employment potential created in the last two decades has led to the establishment of many Paying Guest (PG) accommodations, both for males and females (separately) and also for co-living partners. Although Rs. 300/ is to be charged from these households, the payment is settled with the normal prices of households, without consideration of commercial use. Even many hotels and OYO franchised accommodations function in both the sector areas (38&39), Most of these commercial units are charged with a normal fee, and there is a clear violation in it. Even many hotels and OYO-franchised accommodations function. This is done through the mediation of the administrative authority. The respondents owning such units were very open about their regular payments to police and other officials, allowing them to violate the rules, and they found the rationale for bribing. (Appendix 4.3, FGD No. 2 of Section 38). These are cases of "Non- harassment bribes" where the bribe giver is likely to have gotten something by giving a bribe that she does not deserve to get. (Basu, 2011. p.8)

Concluding Remark

The salience of distrust and uncertainty in public perceptions about Solid Waste Management, as vetted out through the existing structure of the institution of governance, that is, the urban local bodies, has been ciphered through minute observation of the real players in the game of solid waste disposal practices. This is in the midst of a narrative of superlatives by the present dispensation through its official appraisal of the past. But there is a clear indication of disparity "between the expert opinion and appraisal, and the lay conceptions of decentralised solid waste

management by the ‘village folks with their age-old structure of folkloric belief systems grounded in traditions and customs’. Accordingly, actions prescribed by policymakers and those taken by the public to mitigate the problems of solid waste disposal bring forth the dichotomy generally resolved by the process of negotiation, mediation, and bargaining.

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