

Bye the rules

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The new solid waste management rules are an attempt to plug the country's mounting garbage problem. But much of it is only on paper. Imagine landfills as big as New Delhi. That is what a study says India will need if waste continues to grow at the current rate of five per cent a year.

There is cause for concern. India generates about 62 million tonnes of waste annually. Union minister Prakash Javadekar told Parliament that 78 per cent of India's waste went unprocessed and ended up in a landfill.

India is among the top 10 countries in the world when it comes to generating solid municipal waste. By 2030, it is projected that the waste generated in the country will double in volume, The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (Assocham) and Pricewaterhouse Coopers said in their 2017 joint study.

The government has stepped in with a clutch of rules to deal with the situation. New solid waste management rules were laid down in 2016 under the Solid Waste Management Bill and notified by the government in 2018, replacing the Municipal Solid Wastes (Management and Handling) Rules,

2000. This was the sixth notification of the Ministry of environment, forests and climate change (MoEFCC) that related to waste management. It had previously brought out notifications to fight plastic, e-waste, biomedical, hazardous, construction and demolition waste.

But a lot of the changes are only on paper. The rules were announced two years ago but the waste management industry is still in its nascent stage. Officials from MoEFCC said they were not willing to comment on the issue.

The ASSOCHAM and PwC study has found that by 2050, India will need landfills the size of New Delhi, or about 88 sq km, to tackle waste. Metros such as Delhi and Mumbai will be contributing 80 per cent of the entire waste generated in the country.

“Private-public partnerships, and a growing involvement of the public, are the only way forward. Innovative solutions need to be sought out and waste generators need to be made accountable,” says a representative of SPML infra, an infrastructure company which deals with waste management projects.

New rules that have been put in place mandate waste segregation at source across the country. Under the rules, waste generators — such as households — have to segregate their waste into three categories — dry, wet and domestic hazardous. Market associations, event organisers and hotels have to be responsible for segregation. Brand owners who package their products in non-biodegradable packaging material have to put into place a system under which they will collect the waste they have generated. Producers of sanitary napkins will have to provide a pouch for the disposal of the products.

If there is a gathering of more than 100 people, the organisers of the event have to ensure segregation of waste at source before handing it over to a collecting authority. Gated colonies and resident welfare associations of an area larger than 5,000 sq m will now also have to segregate waste at source.

Municipal bodies can now decide on a “user fee” for waste collection, to be paid by households and establishments that avail of their services, and levy fines on those who litter or don’t segregate their waste. Municipal bodies must also follow a zero tolerance policy for disposing of, burning and burying solid waste, the rules stress. Burning is the most common method of disposal for hazardous waste, a study conducted by the Centre for Natural Hazards and Disaster Studies in Chennai states.

Experts are also looking at the issue of untreated water. Out of the total solid waste collected, 1.7 million tonnes are faecal waste. Often, the lack of sewage treatment plants in a city or locality means untreated water ends up as sludge in a river, as a recent report published by the Centre for Science and Environment points out.

Delhi now has its own by-laws for solid waste management, which were put in place earlier this year. The law puts the onus of disposing waste on the generator. According to data issued by the Delhi government, the Delhi corporations collect 10,000 tonnes of solid waste per day. With its three waste-to-energy plants, the city can process up to 6,100 tonnes per day, and the rest ends up in its three landfills. Municipal Corporation of Delhi has to provide facilities for door-to-door collection of segregated waste and has the power to penalise those who don't follow the rules. As part of the new drive towards waste management, the National Productivity Council under the commerce ministry is the all-India programme coordinator for the implementation of the solid waste management rules laid down by the Centre. It will spearhead capacity-building projects across municipalities, along with the Central Pollution Control Board, and provide necessary knowhow and technical expertise to those involved in both segregation, and disposal. On World Environment Day on June 5, 2017, an awareness drive was conducted across 4,000 cities, which were provided with blue and green bins to segregate at source.

While the government seeks innovative solutions from individual players as well as government institutions, the ASSOCHAM report suggests that the waste management sector be given an industry status to ensure that it comes under regulations, as well as it be promoted as a profitable sector for investment.

The problem of waste in Delhi was declared an emergency situation by the Supreme Court in August this year. It's an emergency that calls for immediate — and long-term — measures.

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