



India's urban wastelands

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Highlights

- The representatives of a road-making equipment manufacturer from Germany and had come to demonstrate their pride: automatic road-laying machines which chewed up and ingested the existing road surface, recycled and reused most of the material, and laid a gleaming, 'foreign quality' road surface behind it as they moved along in front of the BMC building.
- The savings in material costs, it was told, could be as much as 50%.
- Plus, the finished surface was much better than what the BMC's contract workforce could lay by hand.
- At that time, the BMC was India's richest municipal administration, and had an annual budget of around Rs.1,000 crore, even in those days.
- It could have easily afforded these machines.
- The problem of big money
- Of course, nothing came of it. The machines disappeared after a day or two. The small patch of reworked road was soon dug up and everybody forgot about it.

Why?

- The BMC's annual road contracts were far too lucrative for far too many people to allow some foreign interloper to come and rattle the system.
- A major truth about public projects in India — they are not about creating infrastructure or delivering services, but principally about money.
- Yes, infrastructure gets created and services get delivered, but more as a byproduct, not as the main goal.
- Wherever there's money involved, particularly big money, all our rules, regulations, plans and approvals simply serve as a paper trail that is meant to mislead us about where the actual money is coming from and going.
- And nowhere is the money bigger than in the construction sector, which is why it is no surprise by the outcry which followed last week's stay on construction activity in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand and Chandigarh, ordered by the Supreme Court, for the failure of these States and Union Territory in formulating a proper solid waste management policy even years after the deadline.
- Equally unsurprising was the alacrity with which the Maharashtra government raced to formulate a policy and issue directives, and rushed back to the Supreme Court within a few days to get the stay lifted, which the court duly did.

There are rules for everything

- The problem is not with rules. We have rules aplenty for everything, including to deal

with waste, particularly construction rubble, or construction and demolition (C&D) waste, as is the official nomenclature.

- Here, for instance, is an extract from the Construction and Demolition Waste Management Rules 2016, issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change: “Every waste generator shall prima-facie be responsible for collection, segregation of concrete, soil and others and storage of construction and demolition waste generated, as directed or notified by the concerned local authority in consonance with these rules.”
- Here’s another: “Every waste generator shall keep the construction and demolition waste within the premise or get the waste deposited at collection centre so made by the local body or handover it to the authorised processing facilities of construction and demolition waste; and ensure that there is no littering or deposition of construction and demolition waste so as to prevent obstruction to the traffic or the public or drains.”
- But how many constructions happen accordingly and flats get remodeled is unsure.

A suggestion for the court

- India has a staggeringly large C&D waste problem.
- There are no official estimates — the last one was made in 2000 and the estimated waste was at 10-12 million tonnes per year.
- A recent estimate by the Centre for Science and Environment, based on industry parameters for waste generation and McKinsey estimates on construction activity in India, put the figure at over half a billion tonnes per year.
- Even if this is an overestimate, the fact remains that tens of millions of tonnes of construction waste are being dumped in vacant land, water bodies, swamps, marshlands, landfills, or simply by the roadside, destroying soil, poisoning water and polluting the air.
- Given that the courts seem to be the only functioning arm of authority, perhaps the Supreme Court ought to look at doing something similar to what it did for the environment — set up a full-time empowered committee under its watch to monitor and ensure compliance.
- Expecting the political or administrative arms to solve the problem will get us nowhere.

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