

Throwing my garbage into your home

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If I threw my stinking trash into your home, how would you feel? Angry, hopping mad? Ready to rush into my house and shake your fist under my nose? Yet, that's exactly what most of us do each day to the people who live around us – though we don't think about it. Bengaluru sends truckloads of trash – full of maggots, flies and dengue-bearing mosquitoes – to the landfills in villages around us, filling the air with stench, polluting their water, ruining their fertile lands, poisoning their cattle, and destroying their health. The trash dumps are conveniently located (for us, not for them) – far from the city, so we don't have to see where our trash goes.

A city as large as Bengaluru needs a number of waste dumping sites. One of these is in the village of Mavallipura – a village destroyed in 2003, when Bengaluru converted the area into one of its largest dump sites. 200-300 truckloads of untreated waste were dumped daily, often at night to avoid protests from the village. A frighteningly high mountain of waste was created. The village's water supply was destroyed, the leachate contaminating even the deep borewells. The soil and air, agriculture and ecology were poisoned, and disease epidemics became frequent. After fierce local protests and litigations in court – which Bengaluru-based activists helped them with – dumping was finally banned in 2012.

But what does Bengaluru now do with the quantities of waste it generates daily? We claimed we would do ‘scientific’ remediation of the waste dump – but that’s proved impossible. So much of the waste dumped in Mavallipura could have been composted and used as good organic fertilizer. Instead, it’s now mixed with plastic, medical and chemical waste. A mountain of rotting waste can be covered with soil, but it continues to poison the soil and water.

A thriving village’s lives, once shattered, are not easy to repair. As one man from Mavallipura said bitterly, we have left them with no option but to wait for their death and rebirth, for a dream of a better future “in the next life.”

Meanwhile, Bengaluru continues to produce waste, now in increasing quantities. While some of us may compost our trash, the majority of the city refuses to. Individuals may pride themselves on taking reusable cloth bags while shopping, but high-end grocery stores still insist on offering us individual zucchinis and brinjals wrapped in plastic for ‘hygiene’ (a baffling idea!). The waste from everyday packaging – from the soaps and groceries we get online, to the food we order from restaurants using apps, and our indispensable daily Amazon orders – come wrapped in massive quantities of thermocol, plastic and tin foil. Malls, retail stores and restaurants contribute so much to the city’s waste that the efforts of the most heroic ‘zero-waste’ individual pale into insignificance.

Instead of Mavallipura, Bengaluru’s waste is now loaded into trucks that go to an abandoned quarry near Kannuru village, turning the nearby lake black with poisonous leachate. The village begins and ends its day with the smell of garbage -- in a village where doors were always kept open, they now keep their doors and windows firmly closed, all the time. There is no escape from the mosquitoes – or the diseases they bring. One local resident, a truck driver, says bitterly that in his village, he has no place to dump his waste – in the evening, there is a long line of people waiting to access the one permitted dumping space. Yet, the entire city of Bengaluru throws its garbage into his village with impunity!

Go take a journey with the trucks of waste one day. Visit Mavallipura, Kannur, Bilekalalli or Mittigenahalli. See where your trash goes. It’s the least you can do.

*(Harini Nagendra prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong
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