

Keep it simple

On Tuesday, the Supreme Court rebuked the Centre for being clueless about solid waste management in the country. In December last year, in response to a PIL, the apex court had asked the Centre to collect information from the states about progress on the enforcement of the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016. The government has produced a voluminous affidavit which has left the court unimpressed — for good reason. The crux of the 845-page report, according to the Centre's own admission, is that the state governments do not have the required drive to solve the garbage management problem. It pleaded that in a federal set-up, the Centre could not compel the state governments into action. While its appeal to the principles of federalism is well-taken, the Centre's admission of helplessness about solid waste management is perplexing given that it has taken up sanitation — a related issue — with a missionary zeal through the Swachh Bharat Mission. The omission is also difficult to understand given the government's smart cities programme lays much store on waste management.

According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the garbage produced everyday in Delhi increased from 400 tonnes in 2000 to more than 10,000 tonnes in 2017. Bengaluru has had to confront a 1,750 per cent rise in garbage generation since 2000. The CPCB estimates that by 2030, the country will generate four times the amount of waste it generates today. This figure appears ominous considering that most municipalities are at sea while dealing with solid waste. Dumpsites in most parts of the country are past their saturation point. Frequent fires in Delhi's landfills aggravate the city's already foul air. Two years ago Mumbai's biggest landfill in Deonar caught fire, engulfing the city in an unhealthy haze for more than a fortnight.

"Are you admitting your own failure?", the SC asked the Centre on Tuesday. The situation is not, however, so bleak that the government should throw up its hands. Initiatives in Panaji, Alappuzha, Mysuru and some other cities show that garbage management is a matter of simple solutions such as recycling at source, door-to-door collection — with a significant role for the neighbourhood waste collector — and effective public awareness campaigns. These initiatives work on the well-established principle that garbage management becomes a difficult proposition when recyclables, organic wastes and plastics are dumped together. There is no reason for the Centre, then, to have produced a tome, which the apex court has described as "garbage".

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