

# KOCHI'S BRAHMAPURAM

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Smoke from the Brahmapuram waste treatment plant enveloped Kochi for days. | Photo Credit: Thulasi Kakkat

The [March 2 fire at Brahmapuram](#) was not the first at the waste processing plant — a euphemism for a sprawling 110-acre open dumping yard with a failed windrow composting facility and a yet-to-begin waste-to-energy plant. The yard has been witnessing [fire outbreaks at almost the same time](#) every year in the last few years. The Kochi Municipal Corporation, which runs the plant, initially provided a typically listless response. But this proved calamitous as the blaze raged on and a blanket of fetid smoke soon shrouded the city and nearby areas.

Editorial | [Playing with fire: On the Brahmapuram fire and how Kerala needs to have a relook at its waste-processing](#)

There was [no dearth of warnings](#) about this impending disaster. When it followed up on a major fire incident in 2019, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) had found glaring lapses in solid waste handling at the site and had asked the State to show urgency in clearing [the 'legacy' waste at Brahmapuram](#). As per a 2021 estimate, Brahmapuram had about 5.5 lakh metric tonnes of legacy waste dumped over an area of 40 acres.

In May last year, the Kerala government told the South Zone Bench of the NGT that Zonta Infra Tech Private Limited had begun the process of 'biomining' — segregation and conversion of old dump yard waste into reusable resources — at Brahmapuram in January 2022, and that 28% of the work was over by May.

But with talks veering towards a new waste-to-energy plant at the site, which would require a regular supply of huge quantities of waste, the Kochi Municipal Corporation slipped into a slumber and failed to ensure that the fire hydrants at the yard remained operational. This along with the toxic smoke emanating from the mounds of garbage proved to be a double whammy for the firefighters.

It is small wonder that the State Pollution Control Board has now imposed a fine of 1.8 crore on the Municipal Corporation. The NGT, on its part, asked the civic body to deposit a penalty of 100 crore with the Chief Secretary. Meanwhile, the State government launched a health survey in the smoke-hit areas of Kochi.

But there are deeper concerns about prolonged exposure to compounds such as dioxins that

are carcinogenic. When the Thiruvananthapuram-based National Institute for Interdisciplinary Science and Technology conducted studies at Brahmapuram in the aftermath of the fire episodes in 2019 and 2020, alarming levels of dioxin were detected in the air. The institute recommended a deeper study of environmental contamination — in soil, sediment, and water — in and around Brahmapuram. Delaying such a study is inexcusable.

The yard is located in a land-filled wetland abutting a river, which supplies drinking water to a few panchayats in the vicinity, and leachate from the garbage has already polluted the Kadambayar river. The landfill is where more than half a dozen local bodies dump their waste. A fair share of the 326 tonnes of refuse generated by Kochi daily makes it to the landfill.

The latest fire has triggered a political blame game and allegations of corruption in awarding the contract for biomining. A High Court-appointed committee audited the yard premises and found the facilities inadequate. The crisis has given an opportunity to the State administration to review its waste management practices and replicate in Kochi what it has tried out with a great degree of success elsewhere — decentralised management of waste. This would mean processing biodegradable waste in situ (at home) to the extent possible, with the rest treated at community-level treatment facilities. Thiruvananthapuram and Alappuzha have already made strides in this direction and several former dumping yards in the State have been turned into recreational public spaces.

A move in the right direction in the aftermath of the fire, as enunciated by the Chief Minister, is augmenting the Haritha Karma Sena (green army of volunteers) for 100% collection of plastic and other non-biodegradable refuse for safe disposal and recycling under the public sector Clean Kerala Company. The key to good waste management practice is the segregation of waste into as many categories as possible at all levels so that it is easy to handle.

In the backdrop of Brahmapuram, biomining at the nearly 50 garbage dumping sites in the State is set to gather momentum. But what's concerning is the government's resolve to go ahead with unproven, polluting, and unviable solutions such as waste-to-energy plants which Kerala can do without.

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