

# PLAYING WITH FIRE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE BRAHMAPURAM FIRE AND HOW KERALA NEEDS TO HAVE A RELOOK AT ITS WASTE-PROCESSING

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The landfill fire in Brahmapuram, on March 2, has turned the spotlight on the State's ineffectual solid-waste management practices — from a widespread lack of waste segregation at source to discrepancies between contractors' actions to maintain the landfill and their obligations. This was not the first fire at Brahmapuram. Studies by the CSIR-National Institute for Interdisciplinary Science and Technology, in 2019 and 2020, concluded that the many fires released highly toxic substances into their surroundings; they are also likely to have been released in this fire. These facts indicate two problems — solid waste accumulated at the site, and it was not removed quickly enough. And, also, two kinds of failure. First, Kochi's solid-waste management apparatus is too tenuous for the amount of waste it produces and the Brahmapuram waste-to-energy plant is dysfunctional. The former is a pan-India problem, due to overconsumption, low resource-use efficiency, and not handling such waste properly. Solid waste can be biodegradable, when it is composted, or nonbiodegradable, when it is repurposed, combusted, or landfilled. Such waste does not go anywhere else; so, if any of these three channels are clogged, waste will collect in the others. This is why landfills are signs of urban dysfunction. The second kind has to do with waste not being removed efficiently from stockpiles — by feeding it into waste-to-energy plants and by recovering commercially important metals, refuse-derived fuel, and bio-soil — and by storing the flammable waste in a way that would not prevent fires.

The Brahmapuram plant appears to have been in the State's blind spot. Such facilities work only when the relatively more expensive power they produce will be purchased; the amount of combustible waste they receive is proportional to the amount of purchasable power they can produce; and the waste they receive has sufficient caloric content to produce that power. The plant is dysfunctional: the State must explain why and revive it. Also needed are answers about the landfilling and biomining contracts, why contractors failed their obligations, and why course-correction was not effected sooner. It is of concern that the State overlooked Supreme Court and National Green Tribunal orders to prevent such fires. Corruption in the face of the climate crisis beggars cynicism. Finally, Kerala needs to discard centralised waste-processing in favour of the decentralised mode encouraged by its Solid Waste Management Policy. The State is unlikely to meet its goal of being waste-free by 2026 if it does not achieve its circular economies, which it will not unless its trash mountains dwindle instead of becoming climate pollutants in their own right.

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