

PREFACE

This book started as a survey—we wanted to simply know the following: which is India's cleanest city. We knew that once we found out which is the cleanest, we would also find out what makes it so. This would give us the answers for future policy.

We also thought that this was an easy research question—after all, the matter of solid waste management has been around for many years. For years now, courts have driven policy; regulations have been devised and revised and technologies are known—the world has seemingly fixed one environmental problem and that is, sweeping cities off garbage. This was a no-brainer, we thought.

We then did the following: first, we asked readers of *Down To Earth*—our fortnightly magazine—to identify the cities they thought were cleanest. Our readers' poll gave us the first list. We then asked around and based on this background check, my colleagues made a short-list. Each city was visited and the learning was enormous. As the reports came in, what was clear also was that we were finding new exciting stuff, but also all this was pointing towards the need for policy changes in garbage management.

This is where we hit a roadblock. We were under the assumption that this was a much-researched area. But we found that this is not the case. In fact, in spite of the fact that solid waste is taking over our streets, fields and sidewalks, there is little known about the quantity or quality of waste that is generated. The last survey to understand quantity and composition was done over a decade ago. The methodology to calculate waste generated is to simply multiply the population, with an assumed quantity estimate—if the city is small then it is assumed that it would generate 0.2 kg per capita per day of waste and this goes up to 0.6 kg per capita per day in larger cities. But is this really 0.6 kg or is it more? Nobody really knows.

The other big problem is that data on the changing composition of waste—that is, if waste is now more non-biodegradable or plastic or toxic—is not known. All this means that we are planning without information.


But what is absolutely clear to us as we researched for this report is that technology for waste disposal is not the problem. The problem is two-fold.

One, households and institutions are not responsible for management, through segregation or payment of the waste they generate. Two, there is an absolute collapse of financial and institutional (human) capacity and so accountability in our municipal systems. In this scenario, the best option is what we have found exists in Kerala, where municipalities have withdrawn from the waste business. People segregate and compost; informal recyclers collect and sell. This is perhaps

the most exciting model for future waste business in the country. And even if it cannot be emulated completely, it holds important lessons for other cities.

This is not the last word on waste that we are writing. We recognise that there is a lot that we still do not know. But it is the first word and we hope it will stimulate more work, more innovation and definitely more cleaning up.

We plan to continue our work in this area and will continue to develop a more robust system for rating cities to determine who is the cleanest of them all. But what is also clear is that sweeping cities clean is only half the solution. Seeing where the waste goes—or does not go, because it is recycled and reused—is what we need. So, we will track these cities and many more. And bring you our learning each year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sunita Narain', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Sunita Narain