

IN OUR PREVIOUS TWO columns, we shared positive news on how solid waste is being managed in many small towns and also some mid-level cities like Vellore. On learning that the Commissionerate of Municipal Administration (CMA) of Tamil Nadu has been very active in providing an enabling environment for such transformation, we decided to look for state-wide initiatives that may be driving this change.

Tamil Nadu is the most urbanised state in India, with 48.5% of its population living in urban areas. The CMA has under its purview all municipal corporations (11 in number) other than Chennai and all 125 municipalities.

We find that not only did the CMA work on getting the Solid Waste Management Policy for Tamil Nadu in place in July 2018 but also worked hard to ensure that there is state-wide progress in compliance with the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016. While directorates of municipal administration are present in a number of states, it is clear that CMA has used its powers well in facilitating much-needed change in the municipal system of solid waste management in Tamil Nadu.

One important reason they have been able to create a framework of implementation and enforce it down the line is that the commissioner, CMA, G Prakash, had an undisturbed tenure of four- and-half years. He was shifted only recently as commissioner, Chennai, because of the Election Code. This is a very important lesson for all states. Officers must have long postings if they are to deliver. In many states, the average length of a posting for an IAS officer is 1.5 years. The fact that commissioner, CMA, is also chairman, Swachh Bharat Mission (urban), has also helped.

Two significant features of the policy are (i) decentralised processing of waste, and (ii) bio-mining to address the challenges of legacy waste, i.e., the garbage hills which have become an unfortunate hallmark of Indian cities. We cover decentralised processing in this column. Building awareness in the community has been a critical feature of the strategy of decentralised processing.

In implementation, first and foremost, they have insisted on door-to-door collection of unmixed waste, and also ensuring that wastes remain unmixed all along the route of collection, transportation and processing because of detailed micro-planning at every stage.

User charges (starting from ₹20 per month for households) are added every six months to the property tax, for which ULBs are achieving 80-100% collection success. Bulk waste generators (8,000 in number and generating 10-15% total waste) across the state also pay user charges for collection of their dry waste, while they are required to manage their own wet waste.

Compared with a goal of 100% door-to-door collection by December 31, 2018, the actual performance was 92% for corporations and 85% for municipalities. Similarly, compared with a goal for collecting waste segregated at source of 100% by March 31, 2019, the actual achievement was 52% for corporations and 62% for municipalities.

By collecting dry waste only on Wednesdays, households are encouraged to set aside this waste and put out only wet waste for daily collection. Most importantly, if waste is handed over without segregation, it is laid bare on a plastic sheet at the doorstep of the household, while the waste collectors sort the waste in front of one and all. A good way of naming and shaming! This is followed by a counselling session and a penalty if the offence is repeated.

Close to 3,000 communicators have been employed to work under 230 supervisors to make face-to-face contact with individual defaulters to explain to them the importance of segregation and ensure that segregation happens at source. Young girls who have completed their schooling are recruited at a monthly wage of ₹12,000. They have to visit 200

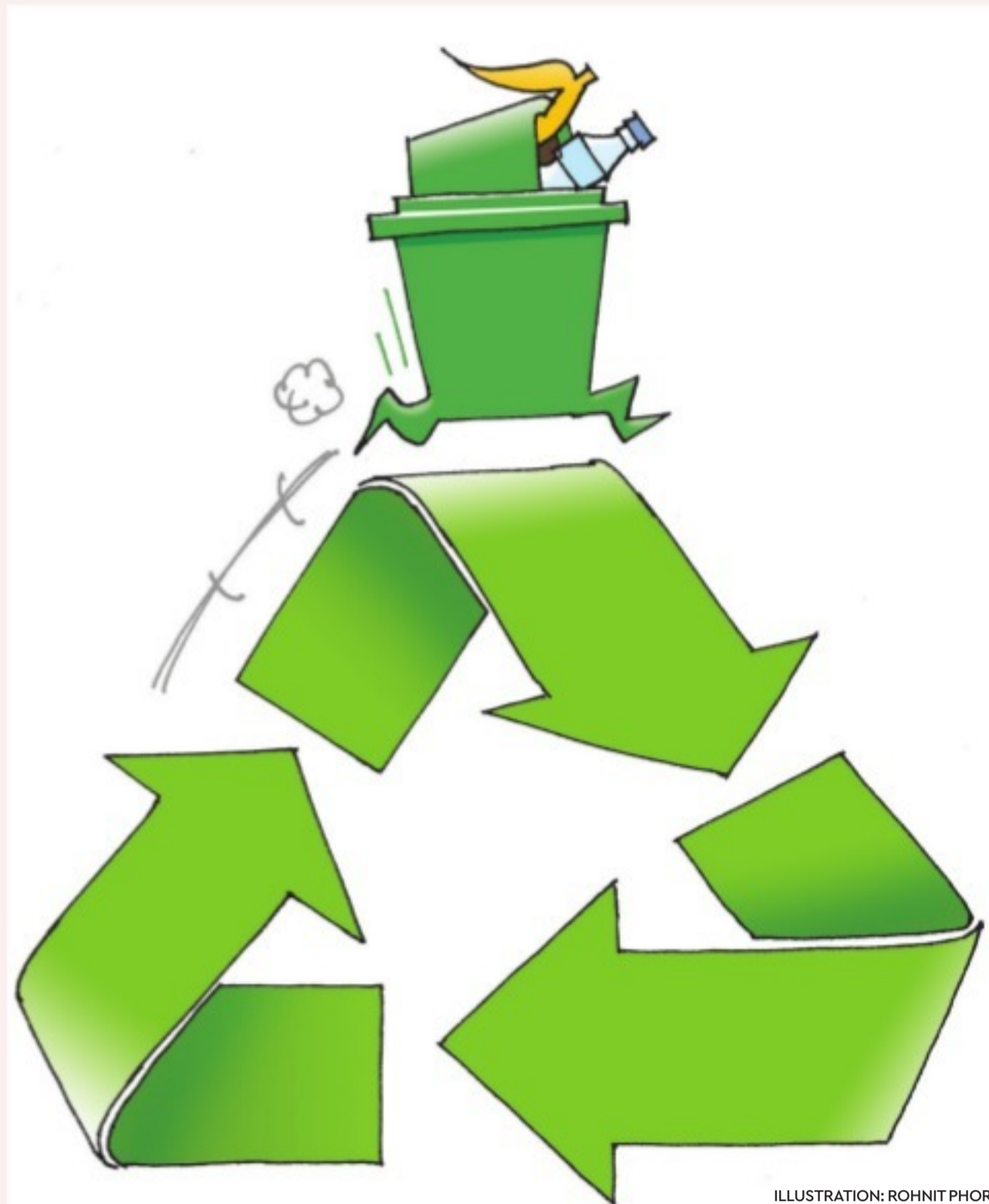


ILLUSTRATION: ROHINIT PHORE

**ISHER JUDGE
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● CITIES AT CROSSROADS

How Tamil Nadu got waste management right

The Commissionerate of Municipal Administration (CMA) of Tamil Nadu not only worked on getting the Solid Waste Management Policy for Tamil Nadu in place but also worked hard to ensure state-wide progress in compliance with the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016

households each at least once a week and randomly cross-checked with the residents by their supervisors.

In order to achieve better efficiency and also lend dignity and safety to waste collectors, push carts and tricycles which were used to transport the waste have been replaced with battery-operated vehicles (e-vehicles) and light commercial vehicles. Since there is no secondary transport, there are no street bins, no transfer points, no black spots, and fuel-saving is a bonus.

Most of the door-to-door collection is done by municipal workers. The collected and well-segregated waste is taken to the micro-composting centres (MCCs) where municipal workers, or, in some cases, private contractors separately handle both wet and dry waste.

The state has installed 700-plus MCCs of up to 4.8 tonne capacity each, using funds from the Swachh Bharat Mission. There are also many more OCCs (on-site composting centres) in parks, compounds of ULB offices, each composting the wet waste from up to 250 surrounding houses. The technology used for composting is simple and time-tested, and has been perfected by V Murugesan, regional executive engineer at CMA. The electricity costs are borne by the ULBs.

There was the usual protest and filing of legal cases against installing MCCs in parks and public places, but the Madras High Court has lent its unambiguous support by stating that "interests of individuals/sang/society may not come in the way of the interest and welfare of the public..."

The doorstep collectors as well as MCC workers get the proceeds of whatever

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waste is sorted and sold. It usually amounts to ₹1,200 per month, which is a little over 10% of their monthly wages. Farmers are encouraged to come and pick up compost free from the MCCs.

The CMA has also performed a national service by conducting a primary survey to estimate the volume of municipal solid waste in their jurisdiction. They conducted a first-of-its-kind statewide survey (excluding Chennai) of waste generation over a period of 10 days, weighing all waste received at MCCs from ULBs—large and small. The waste came from nearly 47 lakh households belonging to all income groups. The survey showed that waste per capita per day is in the range of 250-300 grams for municipalities and 320-375 grams for municipal corporations.

The estimates from the CMA survey provide a benchmark that is much lower than the commonly used estimates of municipal solid waste across the country. This is not surprising, since the system of paying a tipping fee by weight for solid waste collection provides a perverse incentive for transporters to add debris and water to increase the weight of the waste. These estimates also show that the difference in waste generated between large and small ULBs is not very high. However, with changing lifestyle and rapid growth, the gap may well widen in the years to come.

The transformation of the municipal solid waste scenario in Tamil Nadu highlights the importance of a systems approach and the role of human leadership. The good news is that Chennai may follow in the footsteps of the rest of the state in moving towards decentralised processing of waste. This should set a good example for others to follow.

Perish the old thought

**ARPITA MUKHERJEE
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Not allowing perishables through express courier is anachronistic

THE CUSTOMS, IN Mumbai airport, cited the Courier Imports and Exports (Electronic Data and Processing) Regulations, 2010, to ban all perishables through the courier or fast-track route in December 2018. This led to a sudden stop in clearances of drug samples for testing, access to key medicines for patients, exports and imports of food samples for test marketing and display in exhibitions, to name a few. After complaints by the industry and review of the adverse impact, the Customs, in February 2019, allowed courier companies to transport blood samples, subject to requisite clearances by other government departments. Such measures have not only resulted in India's low rank in the World Bank's Logistics Performance Index compared with countries like China, it has led to huge business losses also. The Indian express and courier industry employed around 1.6 million workers and contributed close to ₹3,000 crore to the exchequer in FY18.

India is a signatory to the WTO's Agreement on Trade Facilitation. Article 7, Section 8 of that agreement on "Expedited Shipments" calls for member states to "adopt or maintain procedures allowing for the expedited facilities of at least those goods entered through air cargo facilities". Thus, the ban seems to be against India's position in the WTO. Further, while Mumbai airport maintained the restrictions on "perishable" cargo, the same was getting cleared in Delhi airport, showing a lack of uniformity in the clearance processes.

The root cause of this confusion and restrictions on perishable cargo clearance through the fast track route is that laws governing the movement of goods through the air cargo route were initially governed by the Courier Exports and Imports (Clearance) Regulations, 1998.

Back then, airports lacked the basic infrastructure to support the handling and storing of "perishables" and therefore the movement of perishables via the air cargo route was banned. However, today Indian airports have the requisite infrastructure. The Courier Imports and Exports (Electronic Data and Processing) Regulations, 2010 (an amendment to the 1998 regulation) continues to ban the movement of "perishables" via the air cargo route, which was an oversight at that time by both the industry and regulator. The issue received attention when the Office of the Commissioner of Customs (at the Mumbai Airport Special Cargo Commissionerate) issued a standing order banning the movement of perishables, based on a definition which is doesn't correspond with any globally approved definition of perishables. The order stated that goods classified as "perishables" require testing and clearances by the requisite government bodies such as the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). Therefore, their import should not be allowed as gifts or samples through the courier mode. The FSSAI's Import Regulation, 2017, clearly lays down the process of food import for both commercial and non-commercial use, exhibition, research purposes, etc, and once the requirements are adhered to, there should not be any discrimination across the different modes through which the product is transported, i.e., logistics air cargo versus express air cargo.

It is important that all consignments through any route should adhere to due diligence. The benefit of express cargo is that it is fast-track and offers an integrated service to the client vis-a-vis logistics. As India is implementing trade facilitation and is trying to improve ease of doing business, it is important to amend the 2010 regulation and allow the entry of perishable cargo through the fast-track route. There is also a need to have a robust back-end IT infrastructure which will link Customs with other clearance agencies such as FSSAI. If this is done, India will not only improve its rank in cross-country comparative indices but logistics costs of doing business will decline significantly.

As India is trying to improve ease of doing business, it is important to amend the 2010 regulation and allow the entry of perishable cargo through the fast-track route

WRITE BACK

THE ARTICLE, 'INDIA Post losses touch ₹15,000 crore in FY19; Replaces Air India, BSNL as biggest loss-making PSU,' published in the Financial Express dated April 15, 2019, incorrectly places the Post Office, a department of the Government of India as a PSU. The balance sheet of the department also shrouds some public policy dilemmas of financing universal service obligations of the government.

Indeed, 90% of the cost of the department is in large measure. In the large measure, this stems from the mandate of the postal service in India—physical delivery of basic mail and financial services at each and every door step of the country irrespective of cost. This requires maintaining a network of 155,531 post offices of which 1,39,882 are in rural areas, 1,84,417 full time departmental employees and 2,49,000-part time Gramin Dak Sewaks. Interestingly, at 561 Group A officers, the Indian Postal Service has possibly the most compact officialdom for the size of its network and operations.

It is often passed over that a letter is not delivered at the doorstep in every country of the world. For the record in 2017-18, 634.61 crore mail articles and 659 lakh money orders were delivered. Should India discontinue this and call upon people residing in unremunerated service zones to collect their mail from the nearest post office?

India Post: Beyond the balancesheet

The postal network serves a wide-range of functions that is outside the remit of its private sector competitors

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As a department of the government of India, the salary of the employees of the post office is on a par with other government employees. Should post office employees be paid lower wages than their counterparts in other departments? A question was made before the Pay Commission some years ago that the salary of the postman should be on a par with that of the beat constable. The plea was that both did comparable work. Like the beat constable the postman has a defined beat, like the constable s/he is required to patrol the beat every day and like the constable s/he must visit every doorstep on a need basis. The plea was accepted and the postman started getting the same salary as a beat constable. Who is more visible to

the residents a postman or the constable, who services them more often, who do we want to pay more or less?

The post office runs arguably the oldest and the largest bank in India which has 37.40 crore accounts with outstanding balance of ₹722482.08 crore. Unlike a PSU bank, the post office does not retain or leverage these deposits; they are all appropriated by the government. The post office is remunerated on a cost basis. It also provides life insurance to 1.36 crore policy holders. Despite a nationwide banking and insurance network, why do more people still choose to keep deposits with the post office than any other bank in the country? Should this facility be withdrawn to cut costs?



The popular services provided by the post office include delivery of post cards, inland letters, envelopes, parcels, packets, books and newspapers as also financial services like money orders, savings accounts, and life insurance to name a few. Who are the people using these services in the information age with easy access to online communication and financial services? Should these users be made to pay more by rationalising tariff so that the tax payers pay less to subsidise the post office?

In 2015, the C&AG of India carried out a study of courier services in India and found that while private couriers delivered 90% of letters, Speed Post delivered 99% letters entrusted to it. In major cities,

the Speed Post delivered 99% of letters in 1-9 days while the private couriers delivered up to 92% in the same period. In a report tabled in the Parliament, the official auditor said the performance of Speed Post was better not only at local and major city levels but also at the village and tehsil levels. There are 19,100 pin codes in India. The private couriers service approximately 6,500. Should the post office also restrict packet and parcel delivery to remunerative ones or serve the entire country, remote and inaccessible areas included?

The post office, from time to time, is assigned work beyond its original remit. At some point, it dispensed quinine to fight malaria, contraceptives to support

smaller families. More recently, it hosts Aadhaar enrolment and update centres as well as Passport Sewa Kendras. During demonetisation, the post office accepted deposits of ₹45,650 crore and facilitated withdrawals of ₹12,247 crore. During natural calamities, it acts as the first point of Disaster Management. Should the utility of the post office be judged by its balance sheet only?

Globally, since mid-1980s, there is trend to corporatise the post office, some have even been privatised. Interestingly, the USA, the mecca of capitalism has continued to run the United States Postal Service as a department of the federal government. The strategic reason for doing so is that, at the end of the day, the federal government must have a touch point with the citizen and the post office is the most appropriate agency to maintain such a physicality. Is the post office merely a service provider or also a strategic arm of the Government of India?

It is widely recognised that the post office is the only arm of the government, central or state that is traditionally service- rather than power-oriented. Do we want to cut it to size, do we want to privatise it or corporatise it into a PSU?

As for the flab it carries alongside mail, good wishes, trust and faith, the postal service is happy to receive suggestions to trim them and act upon them. It thanks this newspaper for the time and attention given to it.