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Getting our shit together

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Editorial

June 8, 2018 (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/getting-our-shit-together/>)



Bikram Rai

At personal, family, community or national levels, we Nepalis are generally not given to maintaining high hygienic standards. Waste management is not our forté. Littering is a national trait (<http://archive.nepalitimes.com/article/nation/recycle-reuse-reduce-garbage-kathmandu,1279>), we are genetically programmed to dump garbage at our own doorstep, we let household sewage flow into the drainage system which empties into the river we worship.

Jesuit missionaries who were the first European travellers to pass through the Nepal Valley en route from Tibet to India in the 17th century described the towns here as the dirtiest they had seen in their journey. In those days, that was saying something.

Read also: Toilet trained (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/toilet-trained/>), Sonia Awale

Granted, Kathmandu eradicated open defecation in the streets within one generation. But other than that, we have regressed in every other respect of urban management, acquiring an international reputation for polluting our rivers, poisoning the air, and tolerating squalour.

Google Mt Everest (<http://archive.nepalitimes.com/article/nation/cleaning-up-everest,1408>), and the top news items will be about expedition garbage (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/everest-garbage-caravan>). Search Kathmandu Airport (<http://archive.nepalitimes.com/article/nation/incompetence-of-kathmandu-airport-magnified-during-shutdown,2086>) and this pops up: fetid toilets and a terminal building redolent with the odour of urine. Kathmandu is no longer known as a valley with historic temple towns, but a dust bowl with garbage landfills along a reeking river, and air so toxic it is unbreathable (<http://archive.nepalitimes.com/article/nation/Sick-city,108>).

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We spoke to anthropologists, urban planners, ecologists and governance experts to get to the bottom of this chronic failure to pick up after ourselves. They said the problem is not confined to Nepal: disregard for waste management pervades the subcontinent from Peshawar to Chittagong.

Flush toilets were invented during the Indus Valley civilisation, but today Pakistan's rivers are sewers. Mass defecation by the tracks greets passengers on early-morning train rides in northern India. Plastic landfills are new topographical features on Dhaka's outskirts.

Are there cultural reasons that span religions, ethnicities and nationalities for this regional inability to recognise and handle waste? Is it the inherent fatalism in our societies? Does it have a gender angle in our patriarchies? Are individualism, greed and selfishness factors? Are we hardwired to wallow in our own waste?

Read also: Where to take a dump? (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/opinion/where-to-take-a-dump/>), Bhushan Tuladhar

Finding an excuse in cultural determinism for unhygienic behaviour is a cop-out. The reasons lie instead in the failure of education, collapse of governance, lack of accountability, in corruption and impunity. It is filthy politics (<http://archive.nepalitimes.com/article/Nepali-Times-Buzz/Buzz-plastic-wars,612>) that force people to live in filth. Dirty streets are a metaphor for dirty politics.

We are confronted with evidence of chronic state failure everywhere as we move around Nepal: the putrid Bagmati (<http://archive.nepalitimes.com/article/Nepali-Times-Buzz/the-ecology-of-worship-bagmati,3380>), government hospitals which spread infections instead of curing them, vehicle emissions that have made Kathmandu so toxic the daily pollution average is five times higher than the WHO threshold.

Nepal's holiest temples are the dirtiest parts of its towns. Cremation sites, instead of evoking transcendence and spiritualism, feel like purgatory. Devotees throng festivals in uplifting mass displays of faith, but once the gods have been appeased, they go home leaving mountains of trash and the gory remains of sacrifices.

Cleaning up the Bagmati (<http://archive.nepalitimes.com/article/nation/The-sewage-canal,1161>) every Saturday is a valiant gesture, but alas, it is doomed because it does not address the structural root of the solid waste problem. Two weeks ago this newspaper printed an investigation into why plastic bag bans have been sabotage (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/industrial-scale-litter/>) by successive governments: the manufacturers enjoy political protection.

Plastic bottles are the new global scourge. We reported that Langtang Valley alone has 5 million discarded plastic water bottles, used once and thrown away. Yet, by placing a value on the bottles, they are now being collected for recycling (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/virtuous-cycle/>). To reduce single-use plastic trash, Nepal has to upscale such upcycling.

This week, the world marks World Environment Day with the theme #BeatPlasticPollution. There is growing global awareness about ocean plastic that is killing marine life and contaminating seafood.

Also in this issue we look at the government's open-defecation free campaign (<http://archive.nepalitimes.com/article/nation/%20jajarkot-open-defecation-free,2023>) which, although it has raised awareness and reduced child mortality, has concentrated on building latrines but not on sludge disposal and ensuring water supply. There is a danger they will spread the infections they were supposed to control.

A civilisation is judged by the way it manages and disposes of its waste. Ministers sweeping streets for tv cameras, or donning masks to test vehicle exhausts are just for show. The government has to go far beyond tokenism with policy reform and its implementation.

Smart cities are those which have learnt to generate energy, produce fertiliser and recycle raw materials from their waste. To be smart, Nepal's municipalities do not have to reinvent the wheel. The solutions are all there. Just Google it.

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