

Consumerism's Heavy Burden: Impact of Bulky Waste Generation on Society and Environment

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Introduction

A defining feature of modern civilization is consumerism. The speed at which we acquire and possess material belongings promulgating a use and throw culture is alarming. While it encourages innovation and economic growth, it also comes at a high environmental cost.

India, known for its rich spiritual heritage that prioritises living in harmony with nature, is no different in this regard. As the country continues to undergo rapid economic growth, an expanding middle class, and increased urbanisation, there is an increased demand for consumer goods. This 'earn more - spend more' phenomenon has far-reaching implications, one of which is the notable increase in waste generation (*Chatterjee, S. ,2012*).

Over the past century, consumerism as a way of life has evolved. Its foundation is the notion that obtaining material items is a prerequisite for pleasure and success. The industrial revolution, advertising, and the rise in disposable income during the post-World War II period all contributed to the emergence of a consumer-oriented society. With time, this trend has only intensified, especially in developed nations, but now developing nations are also catching up to this trend (*Inglehart, 1997*).

“**Change Matters**” a project funded by VMWare Software India Private Limited undertaken by Saahas, an NGO working in the field of waste management since 2001, strives to create awareness around proper bulky waste management by showcasing a model in which people can find a sustainable method to get their bulky waste responsibly disposed of and upcycled/ donated

to proper end destinations. Initiated in the year 2022, this project operates in Bengaluru and facilitates bulky waste collection in all the wards of BBMP, thereby ensuring that all the categories of bulky waste ranging from clothes, books, furniture, shoes, e-waste and mattresses are sent to registered recyclers at the end of their useful life. Additionally, it also aims to promote the culture of repair and reuse and in this regard repair campaigns were conducted both in low income and high income communities. Through these repair campaigns, the project not only aimed at increasing the lifespan of items such as clothes, shoes, bags/knives and cycles but also raised awareness against usage of plastic carry bags by converting old clothes into cloth bags. This blog delves into the connection between economic growth, consumerism and bulky waste, exploring the implications for our planet and our lives, based on the findings of project “Change Matters”.

The Evolution of Consumerism in India

Economic Liberalisation: India initiated economic liberalisation in the early 1990s, liberalising trade and opening its markets to foreign investment. This policy shift led to increased economic growth, greater disposable incomes, and the emergence of a robust middle class.

Rise of Urbanisation: The rapid urbanisation of India, with millions of people moving to cities in search of better opportunities, has contributed significantly to consumerism. Urban areas tend to have higher consumption patterns due to increased exposure to global trends and availability of consumer goods.

E-commerce Boom: The proliferation of e-commerce platforms has further fueled consumerism. E-commerce offers convenient access to a wide range of products, tempting consumers to make more purchases than ever before.

Changing Lifestyles: Indian consumers are increasingly adopting Western lifestyles, including the consumption of fast food, electronics, fashion, and automobiles. This shift in lifestyle preferences has accelerated consumerism.

Bulky Waste: What Is It?

According to ‘**The Karnataka Municipalities Solid Waste Management Model Bye laws 2019**’- “Bulky Waste” shall consist of Solid Waste generated by commercial and residential premises which, by virtue of its mass, shape, size or quantity is, in the opinion of the Urban Local Body (ULB) and/or for collection of waste, inconvenient to be accommodated in the daily Door to Door Collection system provided by the Urban Local Body (ULB). Example: Old mattress, old furniture or other bulky waste.

Consumerism's Impact on Bulky Waste Generation

Planned Obsolescence: Manufacturers design products with a limited lifespan, encouraging consumers to replace items like electronics and appliances more frequently. This planned obsolescence leads to a constant influx of bulky waste as older, still functional items are discarded before the end of their useful life.

Fast Fashion: The fashion industry epitomises consumerism, with retailers churning out cheap, trendy clothing at an astonishing pace. As consumers continually buy new clothes and discard old ones, the textile industry contributes to the growing problem of bulky waste (*McNeill, L., & Moore, R., 2015*). It has been estimated that of the 100 billion garments produced each year, 92 million tonnes end up in landfill every year. If the trend continues then the number is expected to rise up to 134 millions tonnes a year by 2030. ([Igini, 2023b](#))

Overconsumption of Furniture: Home decor trends and the desire for constant novelty drive people to replace furniture more often than necessary. As a result, old sofas, tables, and chairs end up as bulky waste. Additionally, one of the factors which has been noticed as a reason for furniture to be disposed of too quickly is due to their deteriorating quality over the years and also the built up material. Modern day consumerism is guided by trendy designs rather than superior quality (*Singh, S., et al., 2018*).

E-waste: The rapid advancement of technology has made electronic gadgets almost obsolete soon after purchase. Discarded smartphones, laptops, and other electronic devices contribute significantly to bulky waste. Even household appliances such as induction tops, toaster, sandwich maker, mixer grinder and bulb fittings add to the e-waste generation significantly (*Pinto, P. M., 2016*).

Packaging Waste: The excessive packaging used for shipping and protecting consumer goods generates a substantial amount of waste. This often includes bulky items like foam, cardboard, thermocol and plastic wrap.

The Environmental Consequences

The environmental impact of consumerism-driven bulky waste is severe. When these items are discarded, they usually end up in landfills, incinerators, or illegal dumping sites. “**Change Matters**” in its two years of operation has been able to divert 52,829 kgs of bulky waste to proper end destinations through recycling and donation to secondhand goods traders or NGOs working with marginalised communities. Through our project we can have an idea about the fraction of problems which is prevalent with respect to proper disposal of bulky waste. Citizens cannot dispose these waste in regular door to door collection system and therefore proper disposal system needs to be in place to handle bulky waste generated otherwise below outlined problems will be prevalent:

Landfill Overload: Landfills are also limited resources. Bulky items and furniture can take up a lot of space, and the more that is taken up by these items, the less space there is for other waste. As the space in landfills decreases, it can become more expensive to dispose of waste, and that can lead to negative environmental effects. For example in the U.S. bulky waste is one of the most difficult and costly waste streams to process in landfills ([Viably, 2023](#)). Items like furniture, mattresses, and appliances are common causes of increased landfill operation costs and as a result, landfills are seeking ways to reduce their bulky waste problems. It has been found in a study by ‘Waste Disposal @SG’ a Singapore based waste collection agency that due to bulky waste items which contain hazardous items, the environment of the landfill surroundings get polluted due to the release of harmful toxins from them.

Resource Depletion: Manufacturing new products to replace discarded ones consumes vast amounts of natural resources, including energy, water, and raw materials. For example, in manufacturing a six foot sofa around 70 yards of fabric is required and on an average in manufacturing a sofa around 70 kilograms of carbon dioxide is released ([O Ecotextiles \(and Two Sisters Ecotextiles\), 2011](#)).

Habitat Destruction: The extraction of raw materials for new products can lead to habitat destruction and loss of biodiversity. It has been estimated that close to 18.7 million acres of forest land is being destroyed due to the high demand of the furniture industry. Deforestation is responsible for at least 10% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions ([Gaurisas-Wilson, 2023](#)).

Social Cost

Beyond the environmental impact, consumerism's contribution to bulky waste generation has social consequences. It perpetuates a culture of disposability, where people place less value on possessions and become increasingly detached from the items they own. Additionally, the burden of managing bulky waste often falls on lower-income communities, exacerbating environmental justice issues. For example, the informal sector plays a crucial role in managing e-waste in India. Informal recyclers, commonly known as e-waste pickers, often work in hazardous conditions, collecting, dismantling, and recycling electronic waste with rudimentary tools. While their contributions are significant, much of this recycling occurs through unregulated and unsafe methods, leading to toxic e-waste pollution.

Solutions and Alternatives

Addressing the impact of consumerism on bulky waste generation requires a multifaceted approach. While individual action by adopting 3R (Reduce, reuse, recycle) concept is paramount, government can take certain steps to regulate rising consumerism and promote sustainable production, consumption and disposal:

- **Environmental Regulations:** Enforce strict environmental standards for production processes, encouraging businesses to adopt sustainable practices (*Sustainability | US EPA, 2023*).
- **Tax Incentives:** Provide tax benefits to businesses that prioritise sustainability, while imposing higher taxes on products with significant environmental impact.
- **Subsidies:** Offer subsidies for eco-friendly industries and products to make sustainable options more affordable for both producers and consumers (*Agriculture – EU Action | European Union, n.d.*).

- Consumer Education: Develop educational programs to inform the public about the environmental and social consequences of excessive consumption, fostering awareness and responsible choices (*Sustainable Consumption and Production* | IGES, 2023).
- Waste Management Policies: Establish regulations for proper waste disposal and encourage recycling programs to minimise environmental impact of discarded goods (*Waste From Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE)*, n.d.).
- Resource Management: Monitor and regulate the extraction and use of natural resources, promoting sustainable practices and efforts (*Why Forests Matter*, 2023).

Conclusion

Consumerism's impact on bulky waste generation is undeniable, posing significant environmental and social challenges. Although government policies can drive a more holistic action for all the stakeholders, as consumers, we must recognize our role in this cycle and make conscious choices to reduce waste. Manufacturers, policymakers, and communities also play vital roles in shifting toward a more sustainable and responsible approach to consumption. By rethinking our relationship with material possessions and adopting practices that prioritise longevity and resource conservation, we can mitigate the harmful consequences of consumerism on bulky waste generation and build a more sustainable future.

Until then, the role of bulky waste management becomes increasingly important. Projects such as “Change Matters” provide an impetus for individual action, by supporting the existing waste management system in Bengaluru.

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