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Something's rotting in the city of Mumbai

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One of the drawbacks of living in Mumbai is that garbage is a constant companion. It's omnipresent. You see it as soon as you step out of home — whether you live in a gated apartment complex in Sewri or a cooperative society in Matunga. It's on the pavements, it lines most roads, clogs drains and covers train

tracks.

Most Mumbaikars, me included, are impervious to this constant display of garbage. For us, it merges into the urban landscape — the way electricity poles or men who scratch their nether regions do.

But I've noticed recently, and correct me if I'm wrong, that there's way more garbage on the streets today as compared to a few years ago. What can be the reason for this? I have three theories:

1. The erratic monsoon: It's probably the BMC's best kept secret. The monsoon does the BMC and Mumbaikars one big favour by washing the past year's accumulated garbage from the streets into the Arabian sea. Yes, all of it doesn't make it that far. Some clogs drains that lead to the sea. But that garbage is dutifully removed by BMC contractors and left on the side of the drains so that it can go down for sure during the next heavy shower. This year, that shower — the ceaseless, ferocious downpour that sweeps away almost everything in its path that appears at least 3-4 times every season — didn't make an appearance even once. This is why we must all hold our breaths till the next monsoon.

2. Garbage debt: The BMC's contract with garbage contractors expired at the end of May and no one was in a tearing hurry to renew it. By the time the BMC got its act together, the city was s(t)inking in garbage. Garbage wasn't collected in some areas for at least 45 days. Though interested parties, like ward members, took the initiative to clear some of it, it wasn't enough. The BMC's Environment Status Report for 2011-12 says the city generates 9,200 metric tonnes of garbage daily. Given that BMC contractors don't generally collect every scrap even while working at full capacity, it's not wrong to conclude that the garbage that accumulated during those 45 days of contract limbo is probably still adorning Mumbai's streets.

3. Annual increase in garbage, no increase in clearing capacity: Garbage generated increases every year. In 2011-12, it was up 700 metric tonnes from 8500 metric tonnes the previous year. But Mumbai's garbage clearing capacity probably hasn't changed since the time the Portuguese handed over Bombay as dowry to the British. On a more serious note, even if the capacity has increased, it is clearly inadequate given the current state of the city. This capacity should be augmented every year if Mumbai is ever get garbage free.

Part of the problem is that we are rapidly running out of landfills. This is where garbage segregation comes in.

Indians are one of the best recyclers in the world. Our ragpickers pick most garbage dumps clean of anything recyclable. However, often things that are recyclable are rendered un-recyclable because of contamination from wet waste. Though the BMC started implementing a Garbage Segregation Plan in 2011, the success rate is a dismal 15%.

This is unacceptable. Besides augmenting capacity, the BMC must ensure garbage is segregated and stays that way at every stage. It's the only way to manage the ever-increasing amount of garbage without opening newer landfills in a country where land is at a premium.

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