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Dealing with waste, the Japanese way

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Fukuoka: A few kilometers east of the central business district of Fukuoka, which is Japan's seventh largest city, lies an unassuming green hill. Since 2013, much of the garbage generated by this city of 1.5 million people has eventually found its way to the hill which has been christened as 'Mandoka' (which means 'mutual support').

The Japanese garbage mountain is, however, distinctly different – there is no stench, the spartan building which houses “waste workers” looks like any modern office, and the garbage mountain even offers a scenic view of the city. Speaking at a recent forum on **solid waste** management, which saw the participation of city managers and journalists from across Asia, Yasushi Matsufuji, professor emeritus at Fukuoka University, made a strong pitch for finding technology-driven fixes for the garbage hills that have come to dot Asia's growing cities. The forum was organized by UN-HABITAT, an arm of the United Nations, and the Japanese government, in collaboration with the *Nishinippon Shimbun* newspaper.

Matsufuji said that Japan's own **fight against waste** received national attention for the first time in the 1970s when an artificial “landfill” island off the coast of Tokyo emerged as a major public health hazard. Three decades of trial-and-error has resulted in a fairly straight-forward fix: sort the waste, incinerate anything that cannot be decomposed, and landfill the remaining toxic flyash residue in controlled aeration pits carved out of a hill. The leachate (harmful liquid) from the flyash heap is constantly siphoned out and treated. And heat and natural decomposition is left to do the rest. The “Fukuoka method”, as Matsufuji put it, is low-cost and contains the pollution.

Thus, a landfill becomes more than just a dumping site and, instead, becomes a place where the waste gets treated. In **India**, on the other hand, only a third of the waste is treated in some form, according to the urban affairs ministry's own data. India's cities already generate over 150,000 tons of municipal solid waste every day, with Mumbai being the world's fifth most wasteful city.

“Change is possible,” Matsufuji said, reminiscing about Japan's own journey. The city of Fukuoka even pays money for bringing **garbage** to the treatment site – about 140 yen for 11 kg (roughly ₹90). As a result of the adequate mechanisms put in place for treatment and containment, parks have come up in former waste sites – not only in Japan but also in other leading Asian economies, from South Korea to Singapore.

“The garbage dump is an important leverage point,” said Kazuo Tase, president and CEO of SDG Partners Inc., a consultancy focused on helping cities and businesses implement sustainable development goals. “By addressing waste, a variety of social issues can be solved. Identifying a leverage point helps to create a ripple effect across the city,” Tase added at the forum.

Waste is a global concern and cities must collaborate to find common solutions, said Shinichi Yoshiyasu, international affairs department, planning bureau, Fukuoka city. “Cities are responsible for solving this problem,” he said.

(The author was in Fukuoka at the invitation of UN-Habitat).

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