



Dealing with Delhi's Trash Mountain

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Abstract

This learning module will help students see the impact Delhi's rapid population growth has had on its waste management system. The video will give them a vivid glimpse of what life is like for those who live and work at the landfill. The module will guide them through questions about the complications that arise when cultural attitudes about class and waste threaten to stand in the way of finding sustainable solutions.

Story Link

<https://www.undertoldstories.org/2017/04/04/tackling-indias-towering-landfills-takes-cultural-innovation/>

Intended Audience

Students of Ethics, Public Policy, Sustainability, Environmental Engineering, and Civil Engineering.

Description of Video

In this video we see the towering Ghazipur landfill and learn about its impact on the people of Delhi. The site covers nearly 70 acres and stands 10 stories high. 2,000 tons

of trash are added each day. The site spews toxic methane gas into the air and fires frequently erupt on the mountain. The government of Delhi has contracted an infrastructure company to address problems arising from the landfill, and serious improvements are underway. One of the main projects seek to convert trash into energy, but the process requires that the trash be properly separated in advance. The project makes things difficult, however, for the so-called 'rag pickers' who have traditionally relied on landfill as a source to mine for income. Complicated issues of caste and class create obstacles for the project, but its proponents claim everyone stands to benefit from the project's success.

Topics addressed

The Ethics of Waste Management, Pollution, Population Growth, Cultural Attitudes about Waste, Socio-economic Status and Vulnerability to harm

Learning Objectives

- Students should be able to think about the ethical implications of population growth and waste management in their own context and in the context shown in the video.
- Students should be able to evaluate the benefits and dangers of relying on the conversion of trash into energy as a solution to waste crises.
- Students should be able to identify the cultural barriers complicating the projects undertaken at the Ghazipur landfill, and consider how best to promote what is just for the most vulnerable stakeholders in these situations

Class discussion questions:

1. Who are the stakeholders in this story?
2. Mahesh Babu describes the trash problem in Delhi as a crisis at many levels. What specific problems is he talking about?
3. Why does converting the trash in the Ghazipur landfill into energy make so much sense?

4. What practical problems have they faced with previous attempts to convert trash into energy?
5. How are the so-called rag pickers affected what's going on at the power plant, and do you think Babu and his team's efforts to help them are sufficient?
6. The video describes how caste and class affect how the people of Delhi think about separating trash. Are there any assumptions about class that go into how we think about waste management in our own communities?
7. How might the way you think about where your trash goes be affected by this window into the Ghazipur landfill?

For Further Study:

Take a look at this information from the Environmental Protection Agency about waste management trends in the United States:

<https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/national-overview-facts-and-figures-materials#NationalPicture>

For statistics about Waste Management in India, see:

Sunil, Kumar et. al, "Challenges and Opportunities with Waste Management in India," Royal Society open Science Vol. 4, Issue 3. March 22, 2107. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.160764>

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