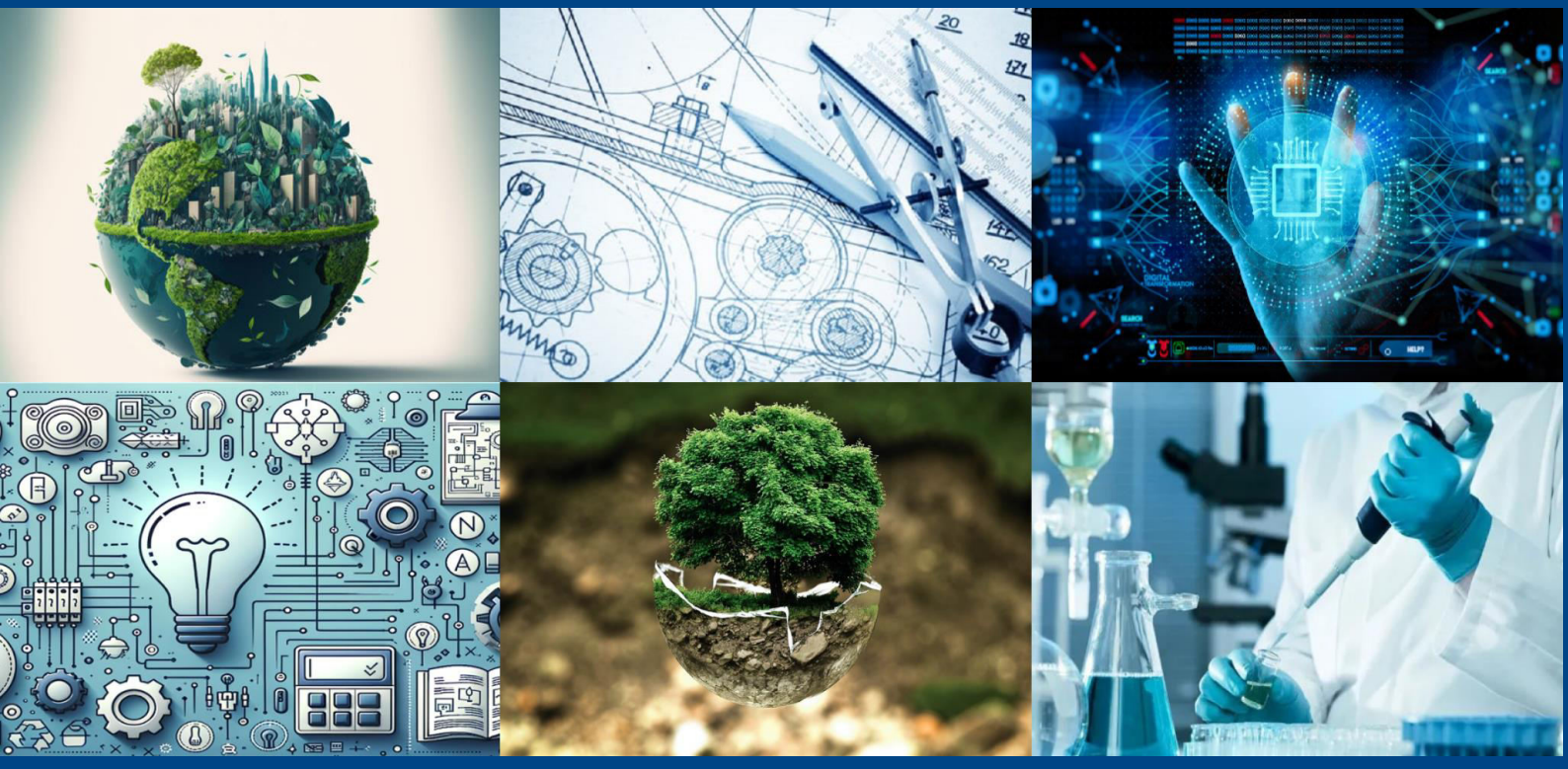
ISSN: 2582-7219

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

(A Monthly, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Scholarly Indexed, Open Access Journal)



Impact Factor: 8.206 **Volume 8, Issue 5, May 2025**

© 2025 IJMRSET | Volume 8, Issue 5, May 2025| DOI:10.15680/IJMRSET.2025.0805069

ISSN: 2582-7219 | www.ijmrset.com | Impact Factor: 8.206| ESTD Year: 2018|

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering and Technology (IJMRSET)

(A Monthly, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Scholarly Indexed, Open Access Journal)

Plastic Waste and the Future of Recycling Technologies

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ABSTRACT: Plastic waste has swiftly emerged as one of the most formidable environmental challenges of the 21st century. Plastic production worldwide has surged over the last few decades, fueled by its affordability, flexibility, and longevity. But the same characteristics that give plastic so much utility render it highly persistent in the environment, causing rampant pollution in oceans, rivers, landfills, and even the food chain. Conventional waste disposal practices, such as landfilling and incineration, have been found wanting in tackling the increasing amounts of plastic waste, usually leading to additional environmental pollution through land use and emissions.Recycling provides a less sustainable option, but existing recycling technologies, which are mainly mechanical recycling, have limited scope and efficiency. Mechanical processes tend to deteriorate the quality of plastics, leading to a downcycled product that cannot be recycled endlessly. Chemical recycling, while promising, remains in its early stages on a commercial basis owing to high capital costs, energy needs, and technical issues. Therefore, a large percentage of plastic waste is not being recycled properly and is adding to an increasing ecological disaster.This paper discusses the development of recycling technologies that seek to break the limitations of conventional techniques. New technologies like enzymatic degradation, solvent-based recycling, chemical recycling, microwave-assisted recycling, and artificial intelligence sorting systems are a new frontier in waste management. These technologies can not only improve recycling rates but also preserve the quality of materials across multiple cycles, thereby making the economy more circular.Also, the position of global policies, public consciousness, and industry accountability is debated as major drivers in speeding up the uptake of new technologies. The issues of economic feasibility, infrastructure creation, and international cooperation are analyzed critically. Case studies of effective recycling programs provide real-life examples of how innovation can turn waste into useful resources.Finally, this study underscores the point that though the plastic pollution crisis is grave in nature, it is not an insurmountable problem. By integrating innovative technologies, cooperative legislation, and collaborative human effort, a future with sustainable plastic waste management and zero environmental footprint is attainable.

I. INTRODUCTION

Plastic has transformed contemporary society, providing convenience, flexibility, and economy in industries such as packaging, medicine, electronics, and transportation. Plastic use has grown exponentially since its

large-scale production started in the mid-20th century, with world production surpassing 400 million tons every year. Yet, the same strength that makes plastic so convenient to use is that it remains in the environment for centuries, generating serious pollution in oceans, landfills, and even

in the food chain.Today, barely 9% of plastic waste is actually recycled globally. Most of it ends up landfilled, combusted (and emitted as harmful pollutants), or simply left to contaminate the environment. Conventional recycling techniques, primarily mechanical recycling, have difficulty handling mixed plastics or contaminated ones and commonly produce lower- quality products, a procedure that is referred to as "downcycling." In addition, certain plastics, such as multi-layered package materials or thermoset plastics, are virtually unrecyclable with conventional processes.

As the world plastic crisis deepens, more efficient and sophisticated recycling technologies are needed urgently. Scientists, companies, and governments are now pouring money into new technologies such as chemical recycling, biological degradation with enzymes, and AI-based sorting systems. These cutting-edge technologies are not only seeking to recycle more plastics but also ensure that the materials are kept at their best quality and facilitate a circular economy where plastics will never end up in the landfill or pollute the environment but continue to be reused indefinitely.This article explains the sources and types of plastic waste, examines historical recycling problems, and

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emphasizes new technologies that can redefine the future of plastic management.

II. RESEARCH MOTIVATION AND SCOPE

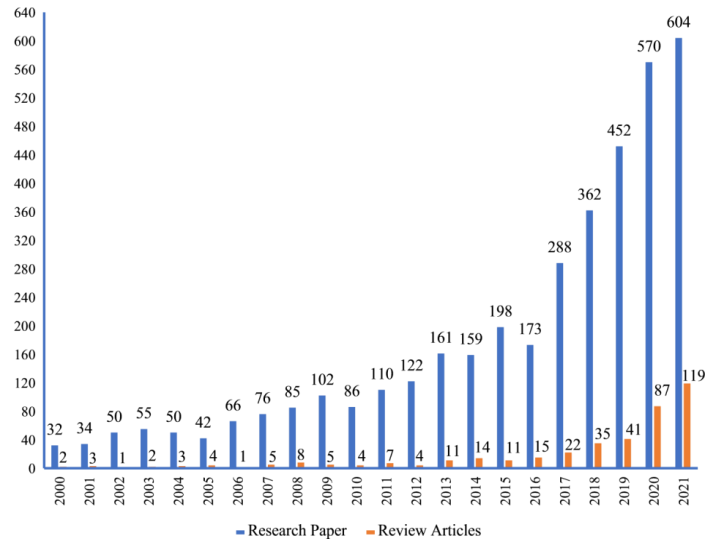
Research Motivation:

The plastic waste problem is increasingly threatening ecosystems, human health, and the economy. Conventional recycling processes are no longer adequate to handle the rising amount and complexity of plastic products. Driven by the imperative for sustainable solutions, this study seeks to investigate emerging recycling technologies that can improve plastic recovery, minimize environmental damage, and bring society closer to a circular economy.

Scope of the Article:

This paper discusses the present situation of plastic waste management, recognizes gaps in conventional recycling mechanisms, and spotlights emerging technologies such as chemical recycling, biological processes, and AI-based sorting. It further discusses world initiatives, policies, and real-world implementations driving innovation. The emphasis lies in learning how these technologies can change the future of plastic recycling and what needs to be achieved to make them economically viable on a large scale.

Fig. 2 Yearly distribution of papers related to plastic waste recycling from 2000 to October 2021



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III. REPROCESSING FACILITIES AND RECYCLING LEVELS FOR VARIOUS PLASTICS

Plastic recycling levels are not uniform in different nations and largely vary according to the plastic in question. Certain plastics can be easily recycled based on their chemical structure, while others pose considerable problems. PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate, Category 1) and HDPE (High-Density Polyethylene, Category 2) are generally accepted for recycling all over the world owing to their suitable nature. On the other hand, PVC (Polyvinyl Chloride, Category 3) and PP (Polypropylene, Category 5) tend to be ranked as "often not recyclable," but conditions in some locations permit their reprocessing. LDPE (Low-Density Polyethylene, Category 4) is not easy to recycle due to its susceptibility to stress failures when being processed. PS (Polystyrene, Category 6) recycling varies and is dependent on local infrastructure, while Category 7 plastics (mixed materials) are largely non-recyclable due to their multifarious composition (CSE, 2021).

In India, approximately 5.5 million metric tonnes of plastic waste are recycled yearly, which constitutes around 60% of India's total production of plastic waste. Of the total, 70% is processed by formal recycling units registered with the government, 20% is processed by the informal sector, and the remaining 10% is recycled at the household level (CSE, 2020). Nevertheless, 40% of plastic litter is still uncollected or scattered, and it is the cause of pollution and blockage of drains (CSE, 2019a).

Disposal practices account for about 2.5 million tonnes of plastics being dumped annually in landfills. More than 1 million tonnes are being burned, while about 0.25 million tonnes are being co-processed by cement companies as a supplementary energy source (Rafey and Siddiqui, 2021).Reusable plastics such as HDPE, PET, and PVC constitute 94% of Indian plastic waste generation. The non-recyclables, including the multilayered packaging films and thermocol, account for the remaining 6% (CSE, 2019b). Recyclable but not recycled are plastics such as PP, PS, and LDPE, either because of process costs or non-economic returns, in India (CSE, 2020).

IV. STATE-WISE INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLASTIC WASTE (PW) FLOWS IN INDIA

India's plastic waste production by 35 states and union territories was approximately 3.47 million tonnes annually in the year 2019–2020 (CPCB, 2021). Plastic processing in India grew from 8.3 million tonnes in 2010 to 22 million tonnes during the year 2020 (Padgelwar et al., 2021).

The predominant form of waste collection throughout the states is door-to-door collection. Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal states are highly engaged in waste collection and segregation (CPCB, 2019; Goa SPCB, 2020; MPCB, 2020). Post-segregation, plastic waste is either landfilled or recycled; for road construction, it is used; it is sent to waste-to-energy plants; or it is processed into refuse-derived fuel (RDF).

•New baling points have been provided in Goa to handle plastic waste more effectively.
•Kerala implemented Reverse Vending Machines (RVMs) in shopping malls and supermarkets to recycle plastic bottles (Kerala SPCB, 2020).
•100% collection with 62% of plastic waste reprocessed by Maharashtra.
•Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) are utilized in Punjab to collect multilayered plastic (MLP) and dispose it in waste-to- energy plants (PPCB, 2018).
• Sikkim was the first state to ban plastic bottles and bags entirely, lowering its carbon footprint significantly (MoHUA, 2019).

States of Puducherry, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal export a large quantity of plastic waste to cement kilns for co-processing (CPCB, 2019).
Telangana has also started household-level segregation of waste into dry and wet bins, with mixed waste frequently utilized for road construction or cement industry processing (TSPCB, 2018).
Even with official initiatives, numerous informal and unregistered recyclers still remain significant in plastic waste management throughout India.

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V. FORMAL AND INFORMAL SECTORS IN INDIA AND THEIR PERFORMANCE

In India, the unorganized sector is greatly involved in plastic recycling and recycles nearly 70% of PET (Aryan et al., 2019). Itinerant waste buyers and waste collectors collectively collect 6.5 to 8.5 tonnes of plastic waste daily. They recycle 50–80% of it (Nandy et al., 2015). A common waste picker collects nearly 19 kg of waste on a daily basis, and an IWB collects nearly 53 kg of waste on a daily basis (Kumar et al., 2018).

Conversely, the formal sector comprises approximately 230 registered recycling units in India (ENF, 2021). These units primarily engage in mechanical recycling—transforming plastic into pellets, flakes, or granules. Altogether, there are approximately 4,953 registered recycling units spread over 30 states and union territories. This comprises 3,715 plastic producers, 896 recycling units, and 47 compostable plastic manufacturers (CPCB, 2021). Nevertheless, the informal sector is also prominent with approximately 823 unregistered units.

Recycling and Disposal Facilities in Various States:
Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal are some of the states that are recycling and disposal strong. Waste in these states is recycled, utilized for road construction, co-processed in cement kilns, or taken to waste-to- energy plants. Still, a large amount finds its way to landfills.

Challenges:
•Though formal recyclers possess technology, they primarily handle clean, sorted, pre-consumer waste. This restricts them from treating the massive quantity of combined plastic waste produced.
•Even in highly resource-dense states such as Gujarat and Maharashtra, formal recyclers continue to experience challenges in collecting sufficient plastic waste for recycling (TERI, 2021).
•Most of the post-consumer plastic waste is created by the informal sector and has a monopoly on the recycling activity. This creates difficulty for the formal recyclers to obtain a consistent supply of material (Satapathy, 2017).
Currently, India has approximately 3,500 formal recycling units and 4,000 informal ones, indicating the far greater contribution the informal sector has in recycling (Satapathy, 2017).
In conclusion, although the organized recycling industry is expanding, it is the unorganized sector that remains the strength of plastic waste management in India, performing the entire gamut of collection, sorting, cleaning, and recycling.

VI. OVERVIEW OF PLASTIC RECYCLING TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR APPLICABILITY IN INDIA

Recycling of plastic waste (PW) in India is possible through a number of processes, and each process has its advantages and disadvantages. These processes are generally classified into four categories: mechanical recycling, chemical recycling, biological recycling, and energy recovery.
1. Primary Recycling (Most Preferred):
This is the most effective method since it entails minimal contamination. Basically, the plastic is recycled without extensive processing, so the recycled product is of good quality. This process consumes less energy and resources, hence the most efficient and eco-friendly method.

2. Secondary Recycling (Mechanical Recycling):
This is the most prevalent process in India for recycling plastic. It sees shredded, washed, and reprocessed plastic waste turned into new products. Although it is effective, the biggest problem is controlling the quality of the recycled plastic because some plastics could be contaminated or deteriorated while being recycled.

3. Tertiary Recycling (Chemical Recycling):
This process consists of recycling plastic into its constituent chemicals so it can be used again. As promising as it sounds, it's not much practiced in India due to the fact that it's expensive and the technology has not yet developed or become as common. Until now, it's not as practical as others in India.

4. Quaternary Recycling (Energy Recovery):
This technique targets the transformation of plastic waste to energy, commonly by burning it. While not the preferred alternative because of issues regarding pollution, it is nevertheless preferable to disposing of plastic indiscriminately. The negative aspect is that it can be a source of air and water pollution, which is why it's not a favorite.

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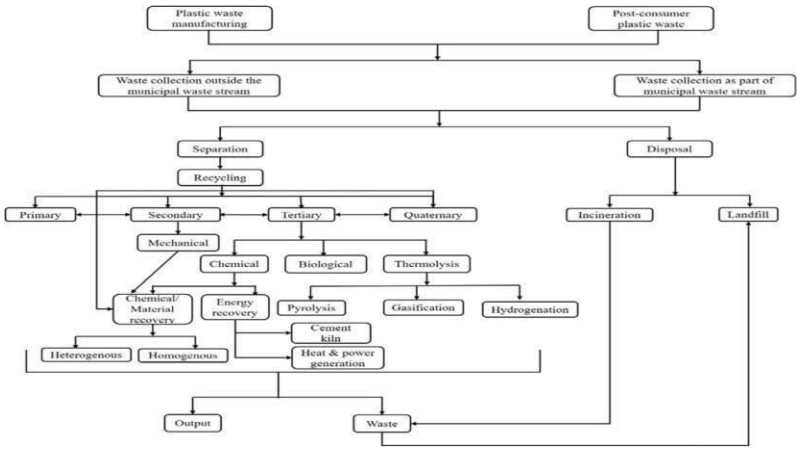

VII. LITERATURE REVIEW

Area of Study	Findings	Sources
Mechanical Recycling	Used plastics are broken down using mechanical processes; cheapest method but has problems with contamination and lower-quality recyclates.	CSE (2021), Ragaert et al. (2017)
Chemical Recycling	Dismantles plastics into chemical building materials; high-quality products but is costly and not yet prevalent in India.	Satapathy (2017), Al-Salem et al. (2017)
Role of Informal Sector	Informal sector workers process ~70% of PET recycling; effective but lacks safety and environmental regulations.	Aryan et al. (2019), Nandy et al. (2015)
Plastic Waste Generation in India	Approximately 3.47 million tonnes generated every year; Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu are key contributors.	CPCB (2021)
Formal vs Informal Recycling	Informal recycling is larger in scale; formal recyclers are increasing but are smaller in size.	CPCB (2021), TERI (2021)
Energy Recovery (Incineration)	Contributes in minimizing landfill burden but can have the potential to cause air and water pollution.	Satapathy (2017)
State Initiatives	States of Kerala, Maharashtra, and Punjab encourage waste segregation, reverse vending machines, and enhanced collection mechanisms.	Kerala SPCB (2020), MPCB (2020)

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VIII. LIMITATIONS

Strength Decreases with Recycling
Each time plastic is recycled, its strength and quality deteriorate. After one or two rounds, the plastic usually becomes weaker than to be reused and remains waste anyway.

Contamination Issues
Plastics need to be extremely clean and sorted well in order to be recycled effectively. When plastic waste is contaminated or mixed with other kinds, it becomes more difficult, more expensive, and less efficient to recycle.

Fewer Types of Plastics Can Be Recycled
Plastics cannot be recycled at all. Only a few such as PET and HDPE are readily recyclable, while others such as PVC, LDPE, and multilayered plastics are hard or even impossible to recycle with available technology.

Advanced Recycling Technologies Are Very Expensive
Chemical recycling technologies which can process dirty or mixed plastics are extremely costly. They are energy-intensive and need sophisticated factories, which many developing nations like India cannot afford.

Pollution Hazard from Energy Recovery
Plastic waste energy from burning plastic may pose hazardous air pollution if poorly managed. It may cure landfills but contribute to environmental damages in other manners.

Heavy Reliance on Informal Labor
In nations such as India, a significant portion of recycling is carried out by the informal workforce who generally work without proper safety equipment, health insurance, or security income. Although they perform valuable work, the system is still disorganized and hazardous.

Lack of Public Awareness and Segregation
Most individuals don't segregate at their residences, which further complicates recycling. Mixed waste generally gets dumped in landfills or in incinerators rather than being recycled.

Low Profit Margins
Plastic recycling is not always profitable. The margins are extremely thin, and since it does not pay much, few companies want to put more into the recycling facilities.

IX. CONCLUSION

One of the largest environmental issues of our time is plastic waste. Recycling has provided a solution in managing this waste through material recovery and relieving pressure on natural resources. Still, recycling is not enough to address the problem since it is burdened by various limitations such as it is expensive to process, energy-intensive, has limited recycling cycles, and has the inability to process mixed or contaminated plastics.

Both the informal (unorganized) and formal (registered) sectors of India make large contributions to plastic waste management. The informal sector alone makes significant contributions by collecting, sorting, and recycling much of the waste otherwise destined for landfills or to pollute the environment. Though they do everything in their power, infrastructure, as well as technology for effective and sustainable recycling, is still on the rise. Problems such as poor segregation of waste at the point of generation, low public awareness, sparse application of advanced recycling technologies (e.g., chemical and biological recycling), and limited funding are among the biggest challenges.

The existing recycling processes — mechanical, chemical, biological, and energy recovery — all have their strengths and weaknesses. Mechanical recycling is the most prevalent, but it has problems with contamination and poor plastic quality. Chemical recycling has huge potential to recycle plastics at a molecular level but is still costly and not well established in India. Energy recovery is applied as a last option, but it can cause air and water pollution if not controlled. To build a genuinely sustainable future, India — and the world — need to change course towards not only improved recycling, but also cutting down on plastics in the first place. Encouraging biodegradable alternatives, making products

easier to recycle, investing in newer and cleaner recycling technologies, and enhancing waste management infrastructure are all steps in the right direction. Government interventions, business innovations, and engaged public activism will all be key to achieving a circular economy in which plastic waste is a resource, rather than a liability.

In plain terms, recycling is a useful friend but no magic solution. We require collective action of "Reduce, Reuse, and then Recycle" if we are serious about preserving the environment for generations to come.

REFERENCES

1. CSE (Centre for Science and Environment), 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has published several reports that bring out the scenario of plastic waste management in India. Their reports cover recycling rates, the contribution of informal sectors, difficulties in processing various types of plastics, and the need for improved recycling technologies at the earliest.
2. CPCB (Central Pollution Control Board), 2019, 2021Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has presented detailed information regarding plastic generation in various Indian states and the status of formal and informal recycling plants. They have highlighted the need for organized waste management and state-wise action.
3. Padgelwar et al., 2021This research analyzed trends in plastic manufacture and recycling within India during the last decade with a significant spike from 8.3 million tonnes in 2010 to 22 million tonnes in 2020. It emphasizes the way demand for plastics is increasing at a rate higher than the recycling process.
4. PlastIndia Foundation, 2018The result of this research was a keen analysis of India's principal recycling centers, including the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Delhi, as well as their handling of bulk plastic recycling.
5. Aryan et al., 2019 This study focused on the way informal waste pickers and small-scale recyclers contribute significantly to the business of India's plastic recycling, particularly for items like PET bottles.
6. Nandy et al., 2015This research demonstrated the amount of plastic waste (approximately 6.5 to 8.5 tonnes per day) that is collected informally and how approximately 50–80% of it is recycled. It emphasized the important position of households and small collectors.
7. Kumar et al., 2018Their work provided an average of how much waste one informal worker collects every day and how informal recycling functions in various regions of India.
8. Ragaert et al., 2017This article talked about challenges in mechanical recycling, such as how the purity of recycled plastics deteriorates with time, and the reason why other types of recycling are becoming essential.
9. Al-Salem et al., 2017This detailed report categorized plastic recycling processes — mechanical, chemical, biological, and energy recovery — and described their advantages and limitations, particularly when implemented in developing nations.
10. Rafey and Siddiqui, 2021This research spoke regarding what becomes of plastic waste that is not recycled, such as how much of it is being incinerated, buried in landfills, or being used to produce energy in cement factories.
11. Satapathy, 2017The writer addressed the status of India's recycling technology today, whether it is economically viable, and why chemical and energy recovery technologies are not yet prevalent.
12. TERI (The Energy and Resources Institute), 2021TERI offered insights into the issues confronting formal recycling industries, including supply insecurity and competition from informal sectors.
13. ENF Recycling Directory, 2021ENF released a list of registered recycling firms throughout India, assisting in mapping the presence of the formal sector.
14. State Pollution Control Boards (Goa SPCB, MPCB, Kerala SPCB, Punjab PPCB, Telangana SPCB)Various state boards have released individual reports and updates regarding the steps taken by each state towards plastic waste management — such as door-to-door collection, establishment of new recycling facilities, application of plastics in road construction, and reverse vending machine installations.
15. Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), 2019MoHUA has directed guidelines for urban waste management and stressed minimizing plastic use, particularly in public areas.

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