

India's SWM Rules 2026: What They Mean for Textile Waste

April 2026

The New Rule, Simply Put

India's Solid Waste Management Rules, 2026 came into force on April 1, 2026. For the first time, non-recyclable textile waste has an official, legal end-of-life pathway: it is classified as Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) and must be burned as industrial energy in cement kilns and waste-to-energy plants.

Cement plants are legally mandated to increase their use of RDF from 5% to 15% of thermal energy over six years (by 2032). Non-recyclable textiles - blended fabrics, contaminated garments, embellished items - are a named feedstock in this mandate.

Why Most Clothes Cannot Be Recycled

The RDF mandate exists precisely because recycling textile waste in India is, at scale, extremely difficult. The reason comes down to what clothes are made of.

Most clothing today is blended - polyester-cotton mixes, stretch fabrics, items with sequins, zari, or embellishments. Blended fabrics cannot be mechanically recycled because the fibers are chemically fused. Separating them requires expensive chemical recycling technology that does not yet exist at scale in India.

The result:

- Only 25% of India's textile waste is recycled into yarn - and most of that yarn fails to meet global quality standards (CSTEP/GIZ, 2025)
- 19% is downcycled into mattress stuffing or padding - delaying, not preventing, landfill
- 17% goes to landfill; 5% is burned in open fields near production clusters, releasing dioxins into the air
- India generates 7.8 million tonnes of textile waste annually - 8.5% of the global total (CSTEP/GIZ, 2025)

The Problem: How This Policy Could Be Misused

On the surface, routing non-recyclable textile waste to cement kilns is better than landfill. At 1,400°C, cement kilns destroy most toxic compounds and absorb ash directly into the cement - no residue. For genuinely unrecyclable waste, this is a defensible outcome.

But the mandate creates a market for burning clothes. And markets shape behaviour upstream. Here is where the risk lies.

1. Burning pays. Recycling often doesn't.

Cement plants have legally mandated RDF targets to hit. They will pay for feedstock. Recyclers, by contrast, only accept clean, single-fiber, good-condition material - a small fraction of what arrives at sorting facilities. Mixed, blended, or contaminated garments have no value in the recycling market.

When burning pays better than recycling, sorting facilities have a direct financial incentive to route garments to kilns rather than recyclers - even when recycling is technically possible. The more pressing the cement plant's procurement need, the stronger this incentive becomes.

2. No mechanism to distinguish recyclable from non-recyclable.

The SWM Rules 2026 restrict RDF to non-recyclable waste. But there is currently no enforcement mechanism at the Material Recovery Facility (MRF) level to distinguish which textiles are genuinely non-recyclable and which are not. Sorting quality is the critical variable - and it is the weakest link in the chain.

Without fiber identification, contamination assessment, or third-party auditing at the sorting stage, the classification of a garment as 'non-recyclable' can be made arbitrarily or opportunistically.

3. Emissions monitoring is still being built.

Burning synthetic textiles - polyester, nylon, acrylic - releases dioxins, highly toxic compounds linked to cancer and hormone disruption. In a well-equipped cement kiln with modern filtration, this is managed. The rules assume such controls are in place.

India's monitoring and enforcement infrastructure for cement kilns co-processing waste is still being developed. There is currently no public data on what proportion of RDF is sourced from textiles, or what emissions result. The centralized online portal mandated under the rules - which is meant to track this - has not yet been built.

4. A guaranteed off-take market competes with recycling investment.

When cement plants offer guaranteed procurement for RDF, it reduces the economic case for investing in recycling infrastructure. This dynamic has been observed in other waste streams: in Europe, mechanical plastic recyclers struggled to compete with the guaranteed off-take offered by waste-to-energy plants. The RDF pathway, designed as a last resort, risks becoming the default - because it is the most economically convenient option for every actor in the chain except the recycler.

India's informal textile recycling ecosystem in Panipat and Tirupur is already price-sensitive and operates on thin margins. A competing RDF procurement market could draw sorting capacity away from recycling and toward fuel processing without any single actor making a deliberate decision to undermine circularity.

What Would Make This Policy Work as Intended

- Mandatory fiber identification and contamination assessment at MRFs before any textile waste is classified as RDF
- Third-party auditing of what enters cement kilns as RDF, with public reporting via the centralized portal
- Price floors or procurement rules that prevent RDF from undercutting recyclable textile markets
- Extended Producer Responsibility for textiles - which does not yet exist in India - to fund upstream sorting infrastructure and make brands accountable for fiber composition at the design stage
- Emissions monitoring at all cement kilns co-processing textile waste, with public data disclosure

The Accountability Gap

The SWM Rules 2026 are a rules-based instrument notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. They carry legal force and financial penalties for non-compliance. But they are not a law passed by Parliament - criminal penalties require the Solid Waste Management Bill, 2025, which was introduced in Rajya Sabha in December 2025 and has not yet been passed.

More critically: Extended Producer Responsibility for textiles has not been notified in India. Brands that manufacture and sell clothing in India have zero legal obligation for what happens to their products at end of life. The entire downstream cost — sorting, processing, RDF, landfill — is borne by municipalities, consumers, and informal workers. This is the foundational accountability gap that the RDF mandate does not address and cannot address on its own.

France introduced mandatory textile EPR in 2007. The EU mandated it across all member states in October 2025. India's status as of April 2026: under policy consideration only.

Sources

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