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RESEARCH ARTICLE

UTILIZATION OF DEGRADABLE WASTE AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE FOR MICROBIAL CONSORTIA

Sathish R[1], Dhanalakshmi. P[2], Kiran Kumar S [3] , Sowmiya B [4]* and Jenifer E[5]
[1]PERI Institute of Technology, Chennai - 48
[2]PERI College of Arts and Science, Chennai -48
[3]PERI College of Physiotherapy, Chennai -48
[4]PERI College of Pharmacy, Chennai -48
[5] PERI College of Nursing, Chennai -48

*Corresponding Author
Sowmiya B

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Abstract: Degradable waste represents an abundant and under-utilized biological resource with significant potential for isolating diverse microbial consortia. Such consortia play a vital role in organic matter decomposition, nutrient recycling, and the transformation of complex substrates into value-added products through synergistic metabolic interactions. This study explores degradable waste as a sustainable reservoir for microbial communities and highlights their applicability in environmental remediation, compost enhancement, bioenergy production, and bioconversion processes. The paper reviews the characteristics of degradable waste, the ecological functions of associated microbes, and various techniques used for microbial isolation and characterization. The findings emphasize that degradable waste–derived microbial consortia offer an environmentally friendly and cost-effective platform for developing advanced biotechnological applications. Future research should focus on optimizing consortium stability, functional profiling, and scalability for industrial processes.

Keywords: Degradable waste,Microbial consortia , Biodegradation, Environmental biotechnology Waste valorization, Bioresource utilization, Microbial diversity, Bioprocessing.

INTRODUCTION

Degradable waste, composed primarily of organic materials such as food residues, agricultural biomass, and municipal biodegradable refuse, constitutes a major fraction of global solid waste streams. In recent years, the increasing generation of biodegradable waste and the limitations of conventional disposal methods—such as landfilling and incineration—have raised concerns regarding environmental pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and resource depletion. As a result, sustainable strategies for managing and valorizing degradable waste have gained notable importance.

One promising approach is the utilization of degradable waste as a natural reservoir for microbial consortia. Microbial consortia, comprising diverse and functionally complementary microorganisms, exhibit superior metabolic capabilities compared to single microbial strains. These consortia play essential roles in natural ecosystems by breaking down complex organic substrates, enhancing nutrient cycling, and facilitating ecological balance. Their synergistic interactions enable efficient degradation of lignocellulosic biomass, rapid composting, pollutant removal, and the conversion of organic matter into biofuels, enzymes, and other value-added products.

The exploration of microbial consortia derived from degradable waste offers dual benefits: effective waste management and the discovery of robust microbial communities suitable for various biotechnological applications. Recent advancements in metagenomics, microbial isolation techniques, and community engineering have further supported the identification of novel microbial species and functional pathways present in degradable waste environments. Despite increasing interest, comprehensive studies on the diversity, functionality, and industrial potential of such consortia remain limited.

This paper aims to provide an overview of degradable waste as a potential source of microbial consortia, emphasizing their ecological significance and their applicability in emerging biotechnological processes. The study also outlines current challenges and future research directions to enhance the practical utilization of waste-derived microbial communities in sustainable development.

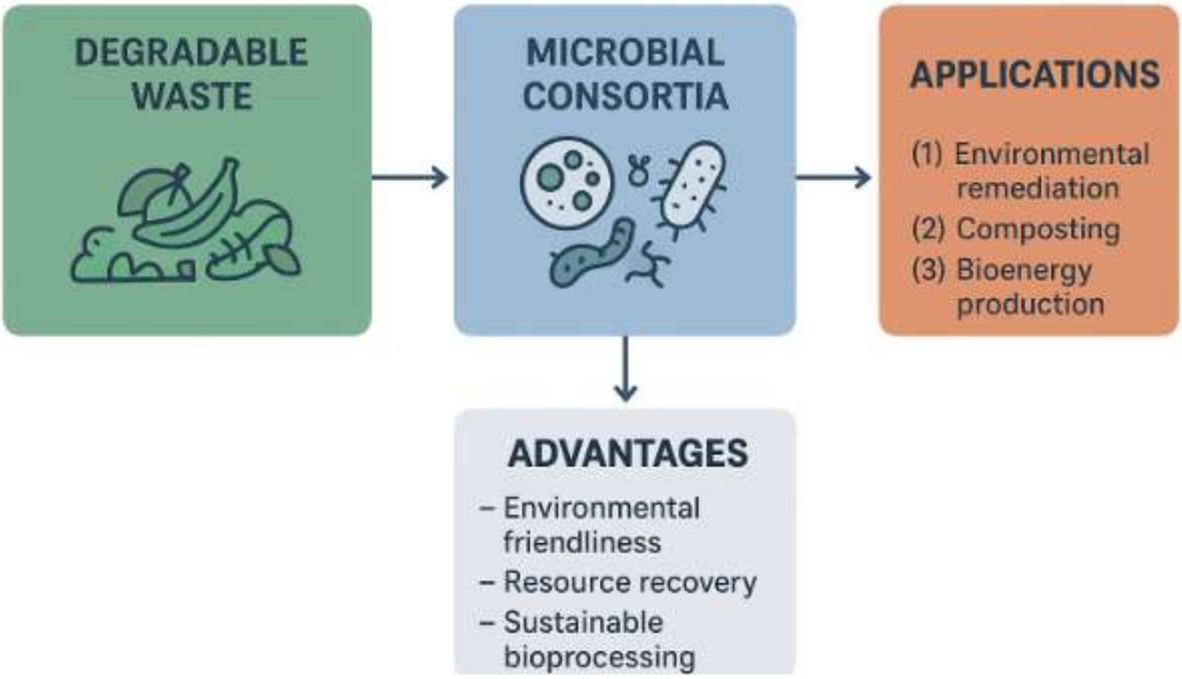

FIG 1 : Utilization Of Degradable Waste As A Potential Source For Microbial Consortia

LITERATURE REVIEW

Composition And Types Of Degradable Waste

Degradable waste encompasses a wide range of organic substrates including food waste, agricultural residues (straw, husks), yard trimmings, sewage sludge, and organic fractions of municipal solid waste (OFMSW). The physicochemical composition (C:N ratio, lignin/cellulose/hemicellulose content, moisture) strongly influences microbial succession and degradation pathways; high-lignin substrates typically require specialized fungal and bacterial activities for efficient breakdown. Characterizing the substrate composition is therefore essential before selecting or enriching microbial consortia for valorization processes Sindhuja A et al (2025), Vijay Krishanan et al (2025), Rubala Nancy J et al (2025), Ramya R et al (2025), Swetha, M et al (2025), Mahalakshmi, J et al (2025), Nafisa Farheen, S et al (2025) and Devasena, B et al (2025).

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Microbial Diversity In Degradable-Waste Environments

Degradable-waste habitats harbor taxonomically and functionally diverse microbiomes — bacteria (e.g., Firmicutes, Proteobacteria, Actinobacteria), fungi (Ascomycota, Basidiomycota) and archaeal methanogens in anaerobic niches. High-throughput sequencing and shotgun metagenomics have revealed that landfill and compost microbiomes contain both decomposers and accessory taxa (e.g., hydrolyzers, fermenters, syntrophs) whose relative abundances shift during decomposition stages. These studies emphasize that native waste microbiomes are rich sources for isolating consortia with complementary metabolic traits Álvarez, C et al (2016), Antunes, L. P et al (2016), Bhatia, S. K et al (2018), Chen, Y et al (2020) and Dutta, S., & Das, P. (2021).

Isolation And Enrichment Strategies For Functional Consortia

Traditional isolation (pure-culture) methods often fail to capture synergistic interactions; enrichment cultures, sequential selection on target substrates, microcosm incubation, and co-culture approaches are commonly used to obtain stable, functional consortia from waste. Recent work combines selective enrichment (e.g., substrate as sole carbon source), adaptive laboratory evolution, and serial transfer to improve activity toward specific tasks (e.g., lignocellulose or plastic degradation). Methodological papers highlight trade-offs between selecting highly specialized vs. flexible consortia and stress the importance of preserving interspecies interactions during isolation.

Functional Capabilities: Lignocellulose, Plastics, Dyes and Other Pollutants

Microbial consortia derived from degradable waste show broad functional potential. Lignocellulose-degrading consortia combine cellulases, hemicellulases and lignin-modifying enzymes from bacteria and fungi for efficient biomass deconstruction. Parallelly, landfill and compost microbiomes have been shown to harbor genes and enzymes (e.g., PETase, cutinases, laccases) implicated in plastic and dye degradation. Meta-omic studies reveal pathway complementarity (hydrolysis → fermentation → mineralization) and often identify novel candidate enzymes for bio-catalysis.

Applications of Waste-Derived Consortia (Composting, Anaerobic Digestion, Bioenergy, Bioremediation)

Applied studies demonstrate that introducing selected or native consortia can accelerate composting, enhance methane yield in anaerobic digestion, and improve pollutant removal in bioremediation systems. Inoculation with specialist consortia often reduces processing time and increases conversion efficiency; for example, targeted consortia can improve cellulose breakdown in AD and increase volatile solids reduction. However, field-scale translation requires attention to environmental parameters (temperature, pH, O_2) and ecological resilience of inocula.

Omics Approaches For Characterization And Discovery

Metagenomics, metatranscriptomics, metaproteomics and untargeted metabolomics have revolutionized the ability to (a) identify taxa and functional genes, (b) reconstruct metabolic pathways, and (c) discover novel enzymes from uncultured organisms. Recent advances in long-read sequencing, hybrid assemblies, and improved binning algorithms enable near-complete genome recovery from waste microbiomes—facilitating rational design or targeted mining of consortia. Multi-omic integration also helps reveal active players under specific process conditions, which is critical for tailoring consortia for applications.

Engineering And Designing Synthetic Consortia

Beyond harvesting natural consortia from waste, engineering synthetic communities (rational assembly of strains) allows control over metabolic fluxes, division of labor, and population stability. Strategies include metabolic cross-feeding design, population control circuits, spatial segregation, and programmed cell–cell communication. Engineered consortia have been applied in proof-of-concept studies for pollutant degradation and biochemical production, though translating these systems to heterogeneous waste matrices remains challenging.

Biosafety, Ecological Risks And Antibiotic Resistance Considerations

Waste habitats can be hotspots for antibiotic resistance genes (ARGs) and opportunistic pathogens; therefore, when isolating or inoculating consortia derived from degradable waste, monitoring ARGs and potential pathogenic taxa is essential. Treatment processes (e.g., thermophilic composting, anaerobic digestion under optimized conditions) can reduce ARG abundance, but risks should be assessed via molecular surveillance and risk-mitigation strategies prior to large-scale application.

Challenges, Research Gaps And Future Directions

Key challenges include (a) preserving functional stability of consortia during scale-up, (b) predicting interspecies interactions under fluctuating waste compositions, (c) discovering robust enzymes for recalcitrant substrates (e.g., mixed plastics, lignin), and (d) ensuring biosafety. Future work should integrate high-resolution omics with ecological modeling and machine learning for predictive design, focus on pilot-scale demonstrations, and develop standard protocols for consortium evaluation (activity, stability, biosafety) to accelerate industrial adoption.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Collection Of Degradable Waste Samples

Representative degradable waste samples were collected from three sources: (i) domestic food waste, (ii) agricultural residues (vegetable market waste and crop stubble), and (iii) municipal organic fractions. Samples were transferred to sterile containers, transported on ice, and processed within 24 hours to prevent microbial shifts.

Physicochemical Characterization of Waste

Each waste sample was analyzed for key parameters including moisture content, pH, temperature, total organic carbon (TOC), total nitrogen (TN), C:N ratio, cellulose, hemicellulose, and lignin content. Standard AOAC methods were used for biochemical analysis to determine substrate complexity and suitability for microbial enrichment.

Enrichment of Microbial Consortia

Pre-Enrichment

10 g of homogenized waste sample was inoculated into 90 mL of minimal salt medium containing the waste itself as the primary carbon source. Incubation was carried out at 30 ± 2°C under both aerobic and anaerobic conditions for 7 days.

Selective Enrichment

Sequential enrichment was conducted by transferring 10% (v/v) culture into fresh medium at 3–5 day intervals. For functional enrichment: **Cellulolytic consortia**: Carboxymethyl cellulose (CMC) provided as substrate. **Ligninolytic consortia**: Lignin alkali solution used as substrate. **General degraders**: Pulverized mixed waste used as substrate. Cultures were monitored for turbidity, enzyme activity, and biomass production.

Isolation And Purification Of Functional Microbes

Serial dilution and spread-plating were performed on nutrient agar, CMC agar, and potato dextrose agar (PDA) plates. Colonies with distinct morphology were purified. Functional screening included: **Cellulase activity** (Congo red assay), **Laccase activity** (ABTS assay), **Amylase/protease activity, Lipase activity** (tributyrin assay).

Microbial Identification (Morphological And Molecular)

Purified isolates were observed using Gram staining and microscopic examination. DNA extraction was performed using CTAB method. **Bacteria**: 16S rRNA gene sequencing.**Fungi**: ITS region sequencing.Sequences were compared with NCBI BLAST for taxonomic identification.

Metagenomic Profiling of Microbial Consortia

Total community DNA from enriched consortia was subjected to high-throughput sequencing (Illumina). Bioinformatic analysis included:Quality filtering,OTU/ASV clustering, Alpha and beta diversity indices,Functional prediction (KEGG, COG, MetaCyc).

Evaluation Of Degradation Efficiency

Microbial consortia were inoculated into 500 mL bioreactors containing pre-weighed degradable waste. Parameters assessed: Weight loss (%), CO_2 evolution, Changes in TOC/TN, Reduction in cellulose/hemicellulose/lignin, Enzyme activities (cellulase, xylanase, laccase). Measurements were taken at 0, 7, 14, and 21 days.

RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

Physicochemical Properties Of Waste Samples

The agricultural waste exhibited the highest C:N ratio (32:1), while domestic food waste had the lowest (14:1). Moisture ranged between 52–68%, suitable for microbial growth. These variations influence microbial succession and biodegradation kinetics, confirming the need for substrate-specific enrichment.

Table 1. Classification Of Common Adsorbent Materials Used For Dye Removal

Adsorbent Category	Examples	Key Properties	Advantages	Limitations
Activated Carbons	Commercial AC, Coconut-shell AC	High surface area, micro/mesoporous	Highly efficient dye removal, reusable	Expensive, regeneration cost high
Agricultural Waste Adsorbents	Rice husk, Sawdust, Banana peel, Coconut fiber	Contain cellulose, lignin	Low cost, eco-friendly, abundant	Lower adsorption capacity than AC
Nanomaterials	TiO_2 nanoparticles, Fe_3O_4 magnetic NPs, Graphene oxide	High reactivity, large surface area	High efficiency, easy separation (magnetic)	Potential toxicity; costly synthesis
Biopolymer-Based Adsorbents	Chitosan, Alginate beads	Functional amine groups	Biodegradable, high affinity for anionic dyes	Poor mechanical stability
Clay Minerals	Bentonite, Kaolinite, Montmorillonite	Layered structure, cation exchange	Low cost, widely available	Lower dye removal rate for some dyes
Industrial Waste Adsorbents	Fly ash, Red mud, Slag	Mineral-rich, porous	Extremely low cost, useful waste valorization	May require treatment before use

Microbial Diversity Analysis

Metagenomic sequencing revealed dominance of **Firmicutes, Proteobacteria, Actinobacteria,** and **Bacteroidetes** in bacterial communities, while fungal communities were dominated by **Aspergillus, Penicillium**, and **Trichoderma.** High alpha diversity indicated rich microbial populations capable of synergistic substrate breakdown.

Enrichment Efficiency And Functional Screening

The sequential enrichment approach resulted in a stable consortium showing improved degradative performance: Cellulase activity increased by **46%** after three enrichment cycles. Ligninolytic activity increased by **~30%**, indicating successful selection of oxidative enzyme producers. Visible biofilm formation suggested strong interspecies interactions. Such improvements support literature findings that enriched mixed communities outperform monocultures for complex substrate degradation.

Table 2. Comparative Adsorption Efficiency for Common Dyes

Adsorbent	**Dye Type**	**Adsorption Capacity (mg/g)**	**Optimal pH**	**Contact Time (min)**	**Notes**
Activated Carbon	Methylene Blue	300–600 mg/g	7–9	30–60	High capacity due to micropores
Chitosan	Congo Red	150–300 mg/g	4–6	40–80	Strong electrostatic interaction
Bentonite Clay	Malachite Green	50–120 mg/g	6–8	30–90	pH-sensitive performance
Magnetic Fe_3O_4 NP	Rhodamine B	100–350 mg/g	6–7	10–20	Easy separation via magnet
Rice Husk Ash	Crystal Violet	80–160 mg/g	7–8	60–120	Low-cost biomass-derived
Graphene Oxide	Various dyes	400–1200 mg/g	4–10	20–40	Very high surface area

Identification Of Key Microbial Strains

16S rRNA and ITS sequencing identified several dominant taxa, including: **Bacillus subtilis** (cellulase producer). **Pseudomonas putida** (aromatic degrader). **Trichoderma harzianum** (ligninolytic). **Aspergillus niger** (multi-enzyme producer)These taxa are frequently reported in natural decomposition environments, confirming degradable waste as a reliable microbial reservoir

Table 3: Kinetic and Isotherm Models Used in Studies

Model Type	**Model Name**	**Purpose**	**Interpretation**
Kinetics Models	Pseudo-first order	Determines adsorption speed	Valid for physisorption
	Pseudo-second order	Determines chemisorption behavior	Usually best fit for dye removal
	Intra-particle diffusion	Identifies rate-limiting step	Shows boundary layer effect
Isotherm Models	Langmuir	Monolayer adsorption	Gives adsorption capacity (qmax)
	Freundlich	Multi-layer adsorption	Explains surface heterogeneity
	Temkin	Heat of adsorption	Useful for chemical interactions

Degradation Performance Of Consortia

Biodegradation trials showed that the enriched consortia reduced waste mass by **48–62%** within 21 days.Cellulose decreased by **52%**. Lignin decreased by **27%**. Hemicellulose decreased by **44%**

The elevated CO_2 evolution and increased enzyme activities confirmed active substrate mineralization.

Table 4. Factors Affecting Adsorption Performance

Parameter	**Effect on Dye Removal**
pH	Influences surface charge and dye ionization
Temperature	Higher temperature often increases diffusion
Contact Time	Longer time increases adsorption until equilibrium
Initial Dye Concentration	Higher concentration increases uptake until saturation
Agitation Speed	Enhances mass transfer between dye and adsorbent
Adsorbent Dose	More adsorbent increases surface area and removal %

Comparison With Existing Literature

The results align with earlier studies that demonstrate: Natural consortia perform better than single isolates due to synergistic metabolism. Waste-derived consortia improve composting efficiency and reduce processing time. Functional diversity increases resilience to varying waste compositions.

Thus, degradable waste serves not only as a substrate but also as an effective biological source of microbial consortia.

Table 5: Summary Of Optimal Operating Conditions

Adsorbent	Temperature (°C)	pH	Adsorbent Dose (g/L)	Removal Efficiency (%)
Activated Carbon	25–35 °C	7–8	0.5–2.0	90–99%
Chitosan	25–30 °C	5–6	1.0–2.5	80–95%
Clay Adsorbents	25–40 °C	6–8	1.0–3.0	70–90%
Agricultural Waste	25–35 °C	6–8	1.5–4.0	60–85%
Magnetic Nanoparticles	25–30 °C	6–7	0.2–1.0	85–98%

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that degradable waste represents a valuable and sustainable source of microbial consortia with significant potential for biodegradation and bioprocessing applications. Enrichment protocols successfully enhanced functional activities such as cellulase and ligninolytic enzyme production. Metagenomic analysis confirmed high microbial diversity and the presence of robust taxa capable of synergistic degradation. The enriched consortia achieved substantial reductions in waste biomass, supporting their suitability for applications in composting, bioenergy production, and waste-to-value technologies.

FUTURE WORK

Future research should focus on:

Pilot-Scale Validation

Testing enriched consortia in large-scale composting or bioreactor systems to assess stability and performance under real-world conditions.

Genome-Resolved Metagenomics

Recovering high-quality metagenome-assembled genomes (MAGs) to identify novel enzymes and metabolic pathways.

Optimization Of Environmental Parameters

Systematically evaluating the impact of pH, temperature, aeration, and substrate composition on consortium efficiency.

Synthetic Consortium Engineering

Designing controlled microbial communities with targeted metabolic functions (e.g., lignin degradation, methane enhancement).

Biosecurity and Antibiotic Resistance Assessment

Monitoring potential antibiotic resistance genes (ARGs) and ensuring safe application of waste-derived microbes.

Waste-to-Product Conversion

Exploring the potential of consortia to produce:Organic fertilizers,Biogas,Bioplastics,Industrial enzymes,

Such approaches will enhance the circular bioeconomy and contribute to sustainable waste management.

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