

RSTV

PERSPECTIVE: SINGLE-USE PLASTIC



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Context

- The **manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use** of identified single-use plastic items, which have low utility and high littering potential has been banned all across the country from July 1, 2022.

What is single-use plastic?

- Single-use plastics or disposable plastics, as the name suggests, are **used only once** before they are thrown away.
- Often these kinds of plastic are not disposed of properly and **cannot be recycled**.
- Single-use plastic items include plastic bags, straws, coffee stirrers, soda and water bottles and most food packaging.

India on single-use plastic

- India features in the top **100 countries of single-use plastic waste generation**.
- India generates **3.5 million tonnes of plastic waste a year**.
- The government data reveals that India's **per capita plastic** waste generation is **3 kg per year**.
- Plastic waste generation during the year 2020-21 is approximately 41,26,997 tonnes per annum as per information provided by all State Pollution Control Boards.

About ban

- **India defined** single-use plastic in an August 12, 2021 notification as “plastic item intended to be used once for the same purpose before being disposed of or recycled”.
- In the same notification, the Union Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change had devised a phase-out plan for 21 select single-use items.
- Hence, we cannot consider it a **blanket ban** as per the definition adopted by India. Even after July 1, 2022, the Indian market will continue to sell a gamut of single-use plastic items like soft drinks and mineral water bottles, all products sold in multi-layered packaging, among others.
- India has imposed a ban on single-use plastics on **items ranging from** straws to cigarette packets to combat worsening pollution in the nation of nearly 1.4 billion people.
 - The ban on single-use plastic items includes straws, cutlery, earbuds, packaging films, plastic sticks for balloons, candy and ice cream, and cigarette packets, among other products
- Plastic bags of thickness **less than 120 microns** will also be phased out from December 31, 2022, in India.
- It has been projected that single-use plastic could account for 5-10% of **greenhouse gas emissions** by 2050.



What is extended producer responsibility (EPR)?

- Extended producer responsibility (EPR) is a critical policy mechanism that helps advance the **circular economy**, decreases the environmental impact of a product and its packaging, and promotes the principle of “**polluter pays**” by holding the producer accountable for the entire lifecycle of the product.
- The objectives of EPR are as follows:
 - Integration of environmental costs
 - Improved waste management
 - Reduction of disposal
 - Reduction of a burden on municipalities
 - Design of environmentally sound products

- The **Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016** introduced the concept of EPR to manage plastics in India.

Roadmap towards ban

- The initiative is in line with **Prime Minister Narendra Modi's** announcement to phase out single-use plastic items by 2022.
- The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change under **Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021** gave guidelines on Extended Producers Responsibility on plastic packing.
- For effective enforcement of this ban national and state-level **control rooms** will be set up and special enforcement teams will be formed.
- State and Union territories have also been asked to set up **border checkpoints** to stop the interstate movement of any banned single-use plastic items.
- The Central Pollution Control Board's (CPCB) **Grievance Redressal App** has also been launched to empower citizens to help curb the plastic menace. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has also announced a **Comprehensive Action Plan** aimed at strengthening India's commitment to ban identified single-use plastic items.
- Industries have been major emphasised by the government as well as experts to increase the production of **alternatives to single-use plastics**.
- **Three-pronged** strategy for banning single use plastic in India:
 - High littering potential - This means products that are **quickly thrown away** post usage. Most of these are disposable items that are found in drains and are seen as products that contribute to littering.
 - Low utility - These are plastic products that have the **least amount of usage** or utility after being used. For instance, wrapping plastic sheets is hardly utilised after the packaging is opened.
 - Availability of alternative - If other alternatives can be used in their place. For instance, paper bags, paper wrappings (which can be made from recycled material), **bamboo spoons** instead of plastic spoons, etc.

Why the need to ban single-use plastics?

- Plastic waste presents a **colossal threat** to the ecology.
- International Union for Conservation of Nature data suggests that the world produces over 300 million tonnes of plastic every year, of which 14 million tonnes **end up in the ocean**. With time, plastics break down into highly toxic microplastics.
- Plastic does **not decompose**, and as a result, it remains in the same landfills that they have been buried in for millennia to come. At the same time, plastic **cannot be burned** as it releases toxic fumes and harmful gases during the process.
- With a ban on such plastic items, India can hope to reduce its plastic waste generation figures.

What changes from July 1, 2022?

- From July 1, 2022, **plastic sticks will be out of the market**. These include earbuds with plastic sticks, candy sticks, ice cream sticks, plastic sticks for balloons, plastic flags and thermocol (polystyrene) for decoration. Even the use of cutlery items will go through a change.
- There will be no **cigarette packs**, plastic plates, cups, glasses, forks, **spoons, knives, straws**, trays or even stirrers for your coffee and tea, to consume your food and beverages.

- Packing and wrapping plastic films like **cling films** that you are used to covering sweet boxes, invitation cards and cigarette packets will vanish. Besides, even plastic or PVC banners of less than 100 microns will no longer be allowed.
- According to the **Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016**, there is also a complete ban on sachets using plastic material for storing, packing or selling gutkha, tobacco and pan masala.

How big is the problem of plastic we are facing?

- Plastic pollution is a very **serious problem**. It is estimated that 3.5 million tons of waste plastic are wasted in the landscape and increased the burden on the environment.
- It **chokes the rivers** and canals and results in floods as well as many other mosquito-prone diseases.
- Plastic on the landscapes **does not degenerate** and is therefore very persistent and hence affects not just the environment but also the economy was hampering the tourist industry in India.
- Similarly, India's **solid waste management** is not very effective. The materials inside the waste are not appropriately sorted out and therefore even in the solid waste dumps it creates a very serious problem.
- Also, many times, several plastics are **coloured and even contain toxic chemicals** which over some time gradually leach and further toxic the environment.
- It is a **global concern** and India is suffering from it in a big way. 300 million tonnes of plastic are expected along the whole of the world, whereas in India it is about 3.5 million tonnes and this quantity is increasing. Therefore, it has become very necessary to stop single-use plastic, as **poor people** are the worst sufferer of this menace.

How will it be implemented on the ground?

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi after announcing the single-use plastic ban in 2021 started **consultations with all the stakeholders**, particularly the industrial sector; plastic manufacturers, the collector of the plastic industry, the processor of used plastic, etc.
- Initially, the **low utility and high-volume** plastics will be targeted simultaneously, alternatives were focused on like paper bags, paper wraps, bamboo straws, etc.
- The **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)** will be the monitoring agency. Whereas the local bodies will be the implementing agencies and will report to Control Rooms at the central as well as at the state level set up by CPCB.
- The government will also emphasise **awareness campaigns** in line with the Swachh Bharat Mission on responsibility towards society.

The entire process is very exhaustive in terms of consultations in bringing all the stakeholders including the industry on board as well as putting in place the alternative mechanisms. However, there are several challenges in implementing it.

Concerns raised by industries

- The foremost issue raised was the lack of **viable alternatives** to plastic. Paper is considered an alternative but it will ultimately lead to deforestation.
- The second issue raised was the waste of **machinery** related to plastic manufacturing, storing, packing, collecting, processing, etc. as this machinery will not be of use to produce any alternatives.
- Factory **labours** who are mostly unskilled will be left unemployed as there is still a need for innovations to find alternatives to plastic.

- Total **plastic waste** (including single-use plastic) in municipal solid waste is composed of nearly 6-8%. The **per capita** consumption of plastics in India is 11 per kg as compared to the worldwide average of 30 per kg. Indian society is different from developed countries that we cannot force laws on citizens.
- The “usefulness” of single-use plastic cannot rule out so easily in India. It is used by the lowest sections of society, which will lack the affordability of purchasing high microns of plastic. Hence, these instances may lead to **black marketing** of single-use plastic.

The per capita consumption of 11 per kg is not very high but it is also not very low. Even on a low scale as compared to developed countries it adds to the pollution.

What is the scope for the alternate viable options?

- Although the per capita consumption or list of plastic is much less as compared to the developing countries, considering the **population of India** it will be of huge quantity or enough to disturb the environment.
- Most Indian agriculture, as well as society, is dependent on natural resources and any damage caused to nature either on the hillside or coastal or plains will have a **huge impact on human societies**.
- At present, the plastic waste problem in India may not be high as compared to developed countries but it has to be **addressed now** rather than wait for large consumption and large discarding of plastic.
- An alternative viable solution has yet not been worked out and has been let out to industries. The need of the hour is to **encourage industries** and support them either financially or structurally.
- The **awareness programmes** should have been much wider and for longer periods so that every section of society understands the meaning of it. Once people are aware, there will be a need for cooperation among all the stakeholders.

The consumer is the most important stakeholder, if they are not fully aware of the need and significance of the ban it might take longer for the entire process to be successful.

How do maintain cooperation from consumers?

- With huge population density the low per capita consumption of plastic will have a huge impact on the environment. The societal intellectual is low compared with developed countries. Hence, consumer awareness will be very important.
- One of the concerns was the **affordability** of alternatives. The government needed to make people understand about paying 2-3 times more for the alternative will ultimately benefit society as a whole in the long term. It is expensive at present due to low demand, once common people will start demanding the cost will reduce, and innovations will be witnessed and will benefit society.

Plastic pollution is a problem for international society, industry is part of the society. Industries will play a major role during this transition period.

What expectations could be built from industries?

- The ban on plastics is based on the **thickness**, for example, plastic carry bag less than 75 microns is banned and the government is set to increase it to 120 microns in December 2022. So, industries should focus on producing plastic bags accordingly.

Way forward

- The alternatives manufactured in India come with a **premium price** which may be unaffordable in most cases. This is primarily due to the scale at which the alternative market currently operates.
- The alternative market needs to be offered **support through government initiatives** to make its reach wider. However, caution is needed when promoting alternatives, so as not to create a fresh set of problems while fighting plastic pollution.
- The plastic industry, manufacturers and FMCG companies should consider coming up with design changes in their product packaging to eliminate the necessity of ancillary plastics like straws. This will be possible when the **companies come together** and pool their resources to find an optimal design that not only promotes profit but also cares for people and the planet.

Making India plastic-pollution free is not going to be easy and the responsibility is not limited to one stakeholder — the plastic industry or governments, for instance. All the stakeholders involved from the production of raw materials, plastic manufacturers, giant FMCG companies, national, state and local governments along with the consumers have their parts to play to make the ban a success.

This is going to be a work in progress, wherein the state pollution control boards and pollution control committees will need to get down on the ground for inspection of facilities, known to be hubs for plastic manufacturing to stop the production of the banned plastic items right at the source.

However, there are several challenges in ensuring a total ban on single-use plastic. There is a need to tackle those challenges from an environmental perspective, from the perspective of future generations and from a global perspective.

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