



## Elimination of single use plastic: Thinking beyond blanket ban by the government

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### Abstract

The government of India has emphasized the banning of single-use plastic which is the biggest source of pollution in the country. The government has intended to ban it in a phase-wise manner. The role of citizens becomes very important in this entire ambitious project and therefore demands active participation. It is a well-settled argument that any government cannot afford to have a blanket ban on single-use plastic. Things that can be replaced are considered such as poly bags, cutlery, straws, plastic spoons, etc. however, the processed food and their packaging is still a big challenge before us. We do not have an immediate alternative to many items in which single used plastic is processed. Further, the segregation of littered single-use plastic is another challenge because littered single-use plastic acts as an obstacle when we try to recycle it.

The best solution apart from the ban endorsed by the government is our daily behavioral changes and awareness that can help a lot to reduce this menace to a significant level. This practice would not be new to this country. From the very ancient times, living in harmony with our environment is enumerated in Vedas, Upanishads and the teachings of Indian culture. This paper will explore various ways through which the problem of single-use plastic can be eradicated with the help of community service. It will analyze as to how the Government can rope in every individual in this important task. I will be using a descriptive and analytical approach to study the subject matter.

**Keywords:** environment, plastic, government, blanket

### Introduction

Plastic has made the life of the human being easy and convenient. The lightweight durable plastic available in cheap price has made it an evil necessity in daily life. This has led to exponential growth in plastic production worldwide. However, it is a well-known fact that plastic takes thousands of years to disintegrate and therefore growing plastic waste poses a serious threat before us. Plastic waste has emerged as the biggest source of pollution in our environment and ecology than any other pollutants. Many studies have observed that most plastics are not biodegradable and after a long time this single-use plastic further turns into micro-plastics. The micro-plastics are even more harmful because they can easily pass through the water filtration system, mixed in water bodies very easily and can cause a serious threat to aquatic life. Apart from this, plastic carry bags and other items can block waterways which could, in turn, can cause a natural disaster like a flood. When we burn plastics, toxic gases emitted from burning leads to severe breathing issues. Long-time exposure to plastic burning gases can cause liver damage because gases like dioxin and furan are harmful to humans.

Single-use plastic is commonly referred to as disposable plastic, which is often used in packing, food processing, grocery bags, plastic bottles, cutlery used in agriculture and pharmaceuticals. The important point to note here is that they are mainly used once and thrown away or recycled. Recycling becomes very difficult because of the poor application of waste segregation and management. In India alone, nearly around 10,000 tonnes of plastic waste is uncollected and segregated (Koshy, 2019) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Being one of the largest populations, aiming to topple China in near future in terms of population, the scenario in India

regarding single-use plastic waste is not very encouraging. If we study the annual report for 2017-18 on the implementation of plastic waste management rules by central pollution control board in November 2018, we will find that we are far away behind in terms of waste management generating through the use of plastic. Our seriousness can be known from the fact that despite the fact India produces around 0.65 million tonnes of plastic every year, 22 states and Union territories do not even maintain data on plastic generation. According to the released by central pollution control board (CPCB), India produces around 25,940 tonnes of plastic waste every day of which only close to 15,000 tonnes are recycled. However, there are some encouraging data which are reflecting some positive signs. In terms of per capita consumptions of plastic in India, it is roughly close to 11 Kg per capita per annum. If we compared this data to the global average of per capita plastic consumption which is 28 Kg, we will find that in terms of plastic consumption we are far behind the global average. Similarly, if we compare per capita plastic consumption per annum of the USA and European Union which is 139 Kg and 65 Kg respectively, we are still far behind in this row. However, this should not deter our aim to reduce our per capita plastic consumption per annum to a record level.

Uttar Pradesh alone generates around 206,733.45 tonnes of plastic waste per annum but only has 34 recycled registered recycling/manufacturing units. Though the state has ordered a complete ban on manufacturing, storage, import, transportation, and sale of plastic carry bags to prevent the menace of single-use plastic. However, the has yet to form a state-level monitoring committee (SLMC) on solid waste management. Other states such as Punjab, Madhya Pradesh,

Uttarakhand, Arunachal, Tripura, Odisha, Manipur, Nagaland have also shown zero tolerance and ordered a complete ban on the manufacturing of plastic carry bags. States like Bihar, Meghalaya have not banned plastic carry bags. On the other side, erstwhile Jammu & Kashmir has a partial ban on plastic carry bags (Annual Report for the year 2017-18 on Implementation of Plastic Waste Management Rules (As per Rule '17(4)' of PWM Rules, 2016, as amended 2018), Nov 2018). However, as I said, the mere ban won't help us to achieve this target if the active participation of the common mass is not ensured. Despite the complete ban in so many states, plastic carry bags are being burnt, apart from being littered on railway platforms and other public places. We should take note of the fact that there is a small difference between 'Single-use plastic' and 'disposable plastics'. We often use these two terms interchangeably. However, when the country is preparing to ban single-use plastic it is important and imperative for all of us to a clarity between these two terms. Similarly, single-use plastic is many times confused with plastic carry bags. While single-use plastic is a broader category and it includes products such as toothbrushes and PET Bottles which has a longer lifetime. Disposable plastics usually contain products that have smaller lifespan such as polythene carry bag, candy wrapper, cutlery, and shampoo packets (Sambyal, 2020).

Proper waste segregation has indeed yielded an impressive result in many of the developed countries. However, mere recycling is not enough to get rid of this sinister trap. According to an estimate, we produce roughly 300 million tons of single plastic and dispose of half of that out of that only 10 to 13 percent disposable are subject to recycling. Additionally, recycling of plastic has proved expensive and complicated for many underdeveloped and developing countries. Since the world is left with very limited options either recycle the plastic or allow it to pollute our environment, we will prefer recycling. In the absence of any efficient waste collection system, waste segregation system, consolidated data on plastic waste, by the various state governments, lack of effective regulatory framework and unclear government policies is further hurting the aim of elimination of single-use plastic.

The government of India has announced its ambitious plan to eliminate single-use plastic in a phase-wise manner. This will be part of the clean India movement the government is undertaking to clean our country. Though the Prime Minister has appealed to the country to eliminate single-use plastic, it has not either presented a roadmap or ban the production of single-use plastic completely. This has left many industrialists primarily the plastic industries in a quandary (Kaur, 2019) <sup>[5]</sup>. In India we often either dump, burn, use in landfill or use single plastic in littering the environment.

However, as an aware citizen of this country, it is our responsibility to take up the challenge of the elimination of single-use plastic. This paper intends to explore the opportunities where apart from a government-sponsored ban on how we the people can extend our contribution to make our villages and cities clean and free from single-use plastic. In villages, it has been part of our old tradition to carry bags made of main clothes when we go to the market to buy daily items like vegetables, kitchen kinds of stuff and other things. Carry bags made of plastic have replaced the use of cloth bags and to a great extent exterminated the old age

practice. Why it is important to discuss here is that plastic made carry bags constitute a larger share of single-use plastic, used once and then thrown away. It is used daily across the globe and therefore demands serious attention for a viable alternative. Our behavioral changes are key to tackle this problem at the societal level. Jute bags are added in this pursuit.

Recently banana leaves were in news in Thailand where these leaves were used by a Thai supermarket for packaging of fruits, vegetables and other affordable items (Nace, 2019) <sup>[7]</sup>. Inspired by this, SunnyBee, a retail superstore in Chennai, has also taken steps in this direction. The owner of this superstore is in direct touch with the local farmers thereby negated the role of the middle man. This has also helped the farmers to raise their earning from 30 to 40 percent which is alleviating their socio-economic conditions (Bhatia, 2019) <sup>[2]</sup>. This is certainly a good idea but it could be expensive in many areas where banana leaves are not available. Also considering the fact that banana takes a lot of water to grow and sustain itself, it could be detrimental to water resources in such areas. However, in tropical areas, it could be used as an alternative to plastic carry bags.

The 'Dabbawala' story in Mumbai is a landmark success in our pursuit to practice reusable products. Every time we order something online to eat, the food is packed in plastic containers. In Mumbai, around 2, 00,000 meals are served on a daily basis in a stainless-steel box which is reusable. A minimum deposit is taken from the customers for the tiffin box, and then they are served a meal in a tiffin box made of steel without using single-use plastic to pack it. It has offered thousands of employments to many as well (Gent, 2017) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Taking this movement forward in the right direction, an online food delivery company called Zomato is now offering choice to its customers to opt-out cutlery made of single-use plastic. The aware customers are now indeed opting out the option of cutlery and using their own utensils available at home instead. This will certainly help to bring down the use of cutlery. However, not many other similar startups are following this. This good practice should be imbibed all across.

India has successfully demonstrated its technological prowess in making roads with the use of plastic waste. These roads are proving to be more durable, strong and efficient. The country has completed the stretch of around 1 lakh kilometer road with the use of plastic waste. Jambulingam in Chennai is the first street to made of plastic waste. Further from 2015, the Government of India has made it mandatory for road builders to use plastic waste in road construction. This Nobel idea gained currency when Prof Padm Sri Rajgopalan Vasudevan showed that by recycling the plastic waste we can use such waste in road construction (Karelia, 2018) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Cities like Pune, Indore, Chennai, Surat are already in the processes of making the road with the combination of plastic and bitumen mix. This recycled plastic waste is helping in many ways. It is not only preventing our environment and surroundings from littering, but it is also making the life of road more durable, saving the cost of bitumen also. However, it is also witnessing natural resistance from many road builders because the more life of a road will increase and the cost of making will go down, it is bound to impact their interest adversely. According to a report states like Gujrat, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Himachal

Pradesh, Meghalaya, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka are sending their plastic waste to cement plants like Ambuja cement, Dalima Cement Ultratech Cement for co-processing. These are some of the successful attempts being made in the direction to eliminate the single-use plastic. We a lot more practices in line which are making a tremendous impact in this regard.

### Fix the Responsibility

By and large, we have seen EPR (Extended producer responsibility) approached with regards to fixing responsibility as to how we can effectively manage that plastic products are not being part of litter after their use. In this, the producer of a manufactured product is expected to take their items back and process for recycling, when the life of such items ends. However, its implementation has seen various challenges. We have a very clear rule that it is the duty of the manufacturer to make efforts in collaboration with the local body to collect plastic waste of their items. However, infrastructural problem, capital, lack of collaboration and improper implementation has made this rule to run on paper only. This approach could not be enforced strictly in India for some other reasons as well. The small manufacturers may find the cost to carry out this task as an additional burden. Therefore, a viable alternative is the need of the hour.

In this paper, I want to suggest an idea that can be further debated and may be adopted if it finds support from concerned stakeholders. The responsibility to collect plastic waste should be shared by both the manufacturer and the producers.

This is being practiced in India by different companies however, a major chunk of manufacturers is not in this loop. We can formulate an agreement where government, producer, and buyer can contribute to the financial requirement this might be needed to collect the plastic waste. Government my give some incentives to either customer or the producers, similarly, the producer may charge the financial cost of the collection from the customers in the beginning and give some incentive at the time of collection. If we bring more players in this then there will be an issue of collaboration again. This model might work for small-scale industries. On the same line, the government should invest more in research and development to find out the alternatives of many plastic items under the dream project of 'Made in India'. Apart from phase-wise banning, the should invest more resources on making a mechanism where a buyer can return his plastic item for recycling and get some incentive.

This will not only save the cost of waste segregation, but it will also expedite the whole process of recycling. Further, the is a serious need to invest more in finding alternatives to plastic items. As I said through 'Make in India' and 'Mudra Yojna', the government must promote and encourage the new entrepreneurs to start such start-ups. The most important thing among all this is public awareness about this illness. Consumers should be encouraged to use eco-friendly products such as cloth bags, reusable water bottles, washable plates, cutlery, and cups. We must also ensure that waste segregation is done at the ground level by the product users itself which will facilitate the smooth recycling of the plastic waste materials.

### Concluding Remarks

The idea to eradicate this menace of single-use plastic was released by the Prime Minister was announced on the Gandhi Jayanti, 2nd Oct. The idea is inspired by Gandhi's preaching of cleanness. It might sound very good to hear but is extremely complicated to carry out. Corers of people are dependent on the plastic industry for their daily livelihood and the plastic industry is one of the key components which provides supports to the Indian economy. Any radical steps without a well-thought plan may endanger all the stakeholders involved in this. However, acknowledging its harmful impact on humans and the environment, we all would agree to reduce and subsequently end this growing menace. At present we cannot sustain a complete blanket ban endorsed by the government on single-use plastic, however, if we think beyond government involvement in it, we may extend out significant contribution at the individual level. By changing our behavior, consumer pattern needs and looking at the worsening condition of environment and species, we all would agree on a viable mechanism to do away with this problem.

I have discussed various ways through which we can make our contribution to make India free from single-use plastics. I have also given some suggestions, which after due deliberation by all the stakeholders, can be practiced. We need more new innovative ideas and for this more investment in research and startups should be done on a priority basis.

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