

Effecting the ban on single-use plastics

What are single-use plastics and how do they impact the environment? What are the amended rules and are alternatives available?

THE GIST

■ The purpose of single-use plastics is to use them once or for a short period of time before disposing of them. There is a greater likelihood of single-use plastic products ending up in the sea than reusable ones.

■ The Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021, prohibited the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale, and use of plastic carry bags whose thickness is less than 75 microns.

■ To ensure the effective enforcement of the ban, national and State-level control rooms will be established, as well as special enforcement teams for the purpose of checking the illegal manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of single-use plastics.

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The story so far: The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India, notified the Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021 on August 12, 2021. In keeping with the spirit of the 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav', the country is taking steps to curb littered and unmanaged plastic waste pollution. Since July 1, 2022, India has banned the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale, and use of single-use plastic (SUP) items with low utility and high littering potential. India is a party to the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). In all, 124 nations are party to the UNEA, and India has signed a resolution to draw up an agreement in the future that will make it legally binding for signatories to address the full life cycle of plastics, from production to disposal.

Why are single-use plastics harmful?

The purpose of single-use plastics is to use them once or for a short period of time before disposing of them. Plastic waste has drastic impacts on the environment and human health. There is a greater likelihood of single-use plastic products ending up in the sea than reusable ones.

India has taken resolute steps to mitigate pollution caused by littered single-use plastics. A number of items are banned, including earbuds with plastic sticks, balloon sticks, plastic flags, candy sticks, ice cream sticks, polystyrene (thermocol) for decorations, plates, cups, glasses, cutlery such as forks, spoons, knives, straws, trays, wrapping or packing films around sweet boxes, invitation cards, cigarette packets, plastic or PVC banners less than 100 micron, stirrers, etc.

What is the impact on the environment?

Littered single-use plastic items have an adverse effect on both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. All countries face a major environmental challenge due to pollution caused by single-use plastic items. India piloted a resolution on single-use plastics pollution at the 4th United Nations Environment Assembly in 2019, recognising

the urgent need for the global community to address this issue. This resolution was adopted at the UN Environment Assembly as an important step forward. In the recently concluded 5th session of the United Nations Environment Assembly in March 2022, India engaged constructively with all member states to develop a consensus on a resolution to drive global action against plastic pollution.

However, India is not the first country to ban single-use plastics. Bangladesh became the first country to ban thin plastic bags in 2002; New Zealand banned plastic bags in July 2019. China had issued a ban on plastic bags in 2020 with a phased implementation.

As of July 2019, 68 countries have plastic bag bans with varying degrees of enforcement.

What are the plastic waste management rules in India?

With effect from September 30, 2021, the Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021, prohibited the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale, and use of plastic carry bags whose thickness is less than 75 microns. From December 31, 2022, plastic carry bags whose thickness is less than 120 microns will be banned.

It means that the ban does not cover all plastic bags; however, it requires the manufacturers to produce plastic bags thicker than 75 microns which was earlier 50 microns. As per the notification, the standard shall be increased to 120 microns in December this year.

The notification clearly mentioned that plastic or PVC banners/ hoardings should have more than 100 microns in thickness, and non-woven plastic (polypropylene) must be more than 60 GSM (grams per square metre). Non-woven plastic bags have a cloth-like texture but are counted among plastics. Still, plastic or PET bottles, counted among the most recyclable types of plastic, have been left out of the scope of the ban.

In addition, the Indian government has taken steps to promote innovation and create an ecosystem for accelerated adoption and availability of alternatives across the country. To ensure the effective enforcement of the ban, national and State-level control rooms will be established,

as well as special enforcement teams for the purpose of checking the illegal sale and use of single-use plastics. To prevent the movement of banned single-use plastic items between States and Union Territories, border checkpoints have been established.

In an effort to empower citizens to help curb the plastic menace, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has launched a grievance redressal application.

The Government has been taking measures for awareness generation towards the elimination of single-use plastics. The awareness campaign has brought together entrepreneurs and start-ups, industry, Central, State and local Governments, regulatory bodies, experts, citizen organisations, R&D and academic institutions.

What is the role of the manufacturer?

In addition, the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change notified the Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2022 on February 16, 2022. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is the responsibility of a producer for the environmentally sound management of the product until the end of its life. The guidelines provide a framework to strengthen the circular economy of plastic packaging waste, promote the development of new alternatives to plastic packaging and provide the next steps for moving towards sustainable plastic packaging by businesses.

What are the challenges?

The ban will succeed only if all stakeholders participate enthusiastically and engage in effective engagement and concerted actions.

However, if we look back at our past, almost 25 Indian States previously banned plastic at the state level. However, these bans had a very limited impact in reality because of the widespread use of these items.

Now the challenge is to see how the local level authorities will enforce the ban in accordance with the guidelines. Banned items such as earbuds with plastic sticks, plastic sticks for balloons, etc., are non-branded items and it is difficult to find out who the manufacturer is and who is accountable for selling because these items will be available in the market even after the



issuing of guidelines.

What's happening on the research and development front?

The consumer needs to be informed about the ban through advertisements, newspaper or TV commercials, or on social media. In order to find sustainable alternatives, companies need to invest in research and development. The solution to the plastic pollution problem is not the responsibility of the government alone, but of industries, brands, manufacturers and most importantly consumers. Finding alternatives to plastic seems a little difficult, however, greener alternatives to plastic may be considered a sustainable option. For example, compostable and bio-degradable plastic, etc., may be considered as an option.

While the total ban on the use of plastic sounds a great idea, its feasibility seems difficult at this hour, especially in the absence of workable alternatives.

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