

[Home](#) / [Opinion](#) / [In Perspective](#) / [Plastic: the evil convenience](#)

Plastic: the evil convenience



Anirban Banerjee and Pratima Singh, JUN 21 2019, 00:16AM IST | UPDATED: JUN 22 2019, 00:17AM IST

Our oceans will have more plastic than fish by 2050, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres warned last year. Researchers have estimated that more than 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic has been generated worldwide since the early 1950s. Only 9% of this waste has been recycled or treated, about 12% has been burned while the rest 79% has accumulated (and still exists) in landfills and oceans.

India is ranked 12th in the world for plastic waste generation. As per the Central Pollution Control Board, in 2015, India recycled/processed 9,000 tonnes out of the 15,342 tonnes of plastic waste produced per day. It is estimated that around 70% of the plastic products are converted into waste. Moreover, 66% of the total plastic waste is mixed waste (polybags and pouches used for food packaging).

A portion of this mixed waste is segregated and processed, and the rest is dumped in landfills and a portion of it is burned. In 2016, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banned waste-burning in an effort to curb air pollution; however, it was not implemented properly. Burning of waste has become a regular phenomenon throughout the country. Every year, the burning of solid waste (which approximately contains 12% plastic) adds 10 kg of dioxins/furans into the lower atmosphere of Mumbai alone. Dioxins are known carcinogens, and thus, it should not be a surprise that 50% of men diagnosed with lung cancer are non-smokers.

Apart from open burning, the other challenge faced by India is that 45% of plastic produced is used only once (single-use plastic). Proper disposal of this huge quantity of single-use plastic has been a challenge due to inadequate recycling facilities.

In 2016, India aimed to double its per capita consumption of plastic to 20 kg a person by 2022. Two years later, India pledged to stop single-use plastic by 2022. This shift not only

also recognises the need for immediate action. But considering the penetration of plastic into our daily lives, implementation of solutions to check plastic use is complicated.

In the last few months, various states in India have adopted policies that regulate manufacturing, use and disposal of single-use plastic. Odisha is the latest to ban single-use plastic, while a few other states are contemplating similar moves. In 2016, the Centre banned single-use plastic with thickness under 40 microns. Shops have been charging for plastic bags in an effort to deter their use. However, neither effort has had much impact. This is because not only is plastic embedded into the very psyche of our day-to-day life but also there are no economical alternatives to plastics at present. So, simply banning plastic will not be enough. For instance, Sikkim, one of the few states to have seen some success in banning plastic, took 20 years to achieve significant reduction.

At present, the onus is on the government to enforce and implement the plastic ban. However, a ban neither addresses the root of the problem (plastic is incredibly useful and extremely cheap and does not have a practical alternative yet), nor does it ensure changes in consumer behaviour. In addition, plastic ban norms have largely ignored industries such as food and packaging, who are bulk consumers of a variety of single-use plastics.

Solving the plastic conundrum requires multiple solutions targeting multiple stakeholders. Moreover, plastic being a global problem, collaborative efforts are required for effective solutions. In the UK, 96 major businesses (including the likes of McCain, Coca-Cola, Danone, P&G, Pizza Hut, PepsiCo, Unilever, and TESCO) have pledged to stop using single-use plastic for packaging. While the initiative promises to tip industries towards a plastic-free economy, at least in the UK, this needs to be translated into action across the globe.

More proactive steps are needed to realise the government's pledge — make India single-use plastic free by 2022. Circular thinking (recycle, reuse and reduce) and 100% source segregation (segregation of degradable and non-degradable waste at household level) of waste in urban areas, as mandated by the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016, can reduce both consumption of single-use plastics and waste-burning to help achieve this pledge.

The segregation share can be improved by incentivising door-to-door dry waste collection — dry waste in exchange for money. While research has identified alternatives to plastic bags (cellulose bags), these are still too expensive (35-50% costlier than plastic bags). Enabling policies that allow a reduction in the cost of alternatives to plastic bags must be put in place.

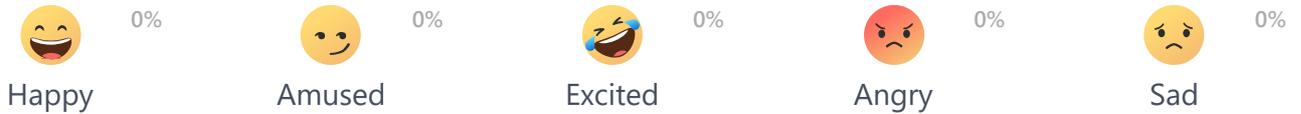
Support to research and development of sustainable alternatives to plastic is paramount. Promoting adoption of reusable bags can also reduce plastic usage by a considerable amount. However, the most important aspect of single-use plastic reduction is public awareness.

maximum reduction in usage. Whether we can overcome the monumental misuse of plastic is something only time will tell. But if the trend is not consciously checked, the message to our future is that we chose convenience over health.

(The writers are with the Centre for Study of Science, Technology and Policy, Bengaluru)

plastics carcinogen Opinion

What is your reaction?



Post Comments (+)

RELATED STORIES



Rethinking diabetes by strengthening IP

25th Jun 2019



A 10-point jobs agenda for Modi 2.0

25th Jun 2019



Minister as party chief

25th Jun 2019

NEXT STORY



[Home](#) / [Opinion](#) / [In Perspective](#) / [Draft NEP: a few tweaks to add value](#)

Draft NEP: a few tweaks to add value

