



Waste Watch

A Newsletter by Chintan-Bharti Waste Resource Centre

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Such a Long Decade!

It's been 10 years since India first began to look at what to do about its plastic waste. In 1996, the Ministry of Forests and Environment set up the Plastic Waste Management Task Force. Filled with representatives and sympathizers of the plastic industry, the task force's biggest concern was related to the image of plastics in the public eye. There was no environmental health representative, nor were there representatives from other industries who may have supplanted plastics in some cases. Instead, the task force advocated for handling plastics by getting users to neatly place their plastics in bins. The fact that anything in a bin would be recycled at the cost of the health and dignity of several thousands of waste pickers and junk dealers was never dealt with. Nor was the fact that plastics are petrochemical based, a fast depleting resource. What a mess!



What's happened in the decade since then?

The Indian Plastic Industry has grown by 20% just last year. This is a huge leap from the envisaged 10% per annum spelt out in the 1996 task force report. But are we even discussing it? Most striking is the shift of the terms of the debate. From discussing plastics per se, we've narrowed down to plastic bags. And then, from thin plastic

bags (about 7 microns), to thicker plastic bags (20 microns). In India, there have been hundreds of local initiatives to get rid of the plastic bag. Some have been successful, others have succumbed to pressure. Poke around the trash from typically Nainital and you won't find a single plastic bag. It's banned here. In Himachal, it's banned too. In Mumbai, the government began with a ban on all plastic bags last year. Then it said it would allow bag manufacturing for out of state consumption. Now, it's only allowing plastic bags with a minimum thickness of 50 microns and a minimum size. It means you'll have 7 times more plastic per bag than you had ten years ago. You're being forced to consume more, even if you reduce your consumption of plastic bags from, say, 5 per day to only 2. Ironic!

Other plastics continue to enter our lives and we embrace them effortlessly. The mineral water bottle, for example. The Earth Policy Institute in Washington DC, has announced that the global consumption of bottles water reached 154 billion litres in 2004, which was 54% higher than 5 years previously. In India, the consumption tripled during this time. The growth rate is estimated



as 30%, which is amongst the highest in the world. Estimates are that before India's population ever reached 1 billion, the number of PET bottles produced here had already reached this mark.

And there is Polystyrene, what you'd call thermocol in glasses and decoration, more entrenched than ever. The increase in production in the last 2 decades is approximately 1700%, with data showing a steady rise.

The fact is, that there is no will to control and hence, reduce the plastics we are consuming. Look at what the others have done. The Irish put a minor tax that resulted in the reduction of a million bags. Bangladesh, Bhutan and Eritrea have all banned plastic bags and Australia has 15 implemented bans in place. Other countries have been taxing plastics and packaging too. Globally, governments are realizing you can't deal with plastics until you approach them as a whole. It's heartening therefore to see how some state governments campaign against plastics, particularly plastic bags. But how can they ever make the positive change if they are still left with rising quantities of other plastic trash?



The Union Budget this year made it cheaper to manufacture plastic. There have been cuts in import duties for many plastics, down to 5%. Many raw materials used for manufacturing plastic have been similarly subsidized. As a result, plastics will be cheaper and alternatives will be unable to compete, making the gap wider. A perverse subsidy has ensured that 10 years later, residents of India have little else but their own local and collective will power to resist plastics.