

The Plastic Penance

Fixing Responsibility Where It Belongs



Until recently, consumers have been expected to shoulder almost the entire burden of fighting plastic pollution by consuming more consciously. As conscious consumers, we must buy our groceries in jars or resist the temptation to munch on those chips in plastic packets. But given the sheer scale of the problem, and limitations of conscious consumerism both in terms of cost and accessibility, there has been a need to think of more impactful ways of tackling the growing menace. It was then in the 1990s that the talk of fixing responsibility on producers for their product and packaging waste began to be discussed under the ambit of Extended Producers Responsibility (EPR).

Why should producers take the responsibility?

Firstly, these brands contribute significantly to the plastics released in the environment. The brand audit of household plastic waste organised by Chintan in May this year proves the fact., as branded plastics formed almost 47% of the total plastic waste collected for the audit (Read more about it in our previous [newsletter](#)).

S. No.	Brand
1.	Mother Dairy
2.	Amul
3.	Delhi Milk Scheme
4.	Harvest
5.	Parle

Secondly, it is undeniable that manufacturers have the greatest power when it comes to deciding the quantity of plastic used in packaging, as well as the quality of their packaging which is crucial to determine its recyclability. And thus, this obligates them to assume significant responsibility to ensure that their products don't end up clogging our environment at the end of their life cycle.

How can the corporations take responsibility?

At present, the cost of plastic packaging is low and does not reflect the environmental costs of the same. Manufacturers thus have an incentive to use it liberally with zero foresight of environmental consequences.

EPR then is a tool to include the environmental costs, and make producers think more cautiously and consciously about the products they put out in the market.

Under EPR, corporations can take responsibility for their waste in the following three ways:

1. Redesign their products so as to ensure minimum harm to the environment. For example manufacturers of chips, chocolates and biscuits can make efforts to shift away from multi-layered packaging which is non-recyclable
2. Share the financial burden of waste management by paying a fee to municipal bodies proportional to how much product they place in the market
3. Create mechanisms to collect, transport and recycle their waste

EPR: India and the world

As per an [article](#) in The Guardian, there are more than 400 EPR schemes in operation across the world, most of which are mandated by laws.

At present all member states of European Union have well established EPR schemes. From 1998 to 2012, packaging recycling rate has shown an increase of 18% for EU countries (Extended Producer Responsibility for Packaging 2015). In Asia, countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea have effective EPR schemes in place. Japan has an extensive EPR law that covers the lifecycle of products from various industries – part of this legislation requires

manufacturers to use recycled materials and reusable parts in new products. Other Asian countries, including India are however still at less advanced stages. In India, EPR was given legal teeth by the Plastic Waste Management Rules of 2011 and 2016.

Rule 9 of PWM rules 2016 states:

“ 9. Responsibility of producers, Importers and Brand Owners: The producers, within a period of six months from the date of publication of these rules, shall work out modalities for waste collection system based on Extended Producers Responsibility and involving State Urban Development Departments, either individually or collectively, through their own distribution channel or through the local body concerned”

However, even after two years of enactment of the rules, it is yet to translate into any meaningful action on the ground.

Informal Waste Workers and EPR

Even though fears are expressed about waste pickers losing their jobs when companies begin to take responsibility of their waste, the informal sector, in fact, presents an opportunity for these corporations to maximise their collection as well as recycling rates.

India has more than [1.5 lakh waste pickers](#) in the informal sector who are responsible for recycling more than [20% of the waste](#) (which is much higher than the global average). They do this both through the door to door collection, as well as through picking waste off streets, landfills or wherever valuable waste is to be found. By tapping on their existing reach and services, manufacturers can hope to build effective EPR mechanisms. Informal sector can be integrated into two stages of EPR:

1. Collection Stage: Involvement of waste workers in collecting plastic packaging
2. Recycling stage: For plastics that are already being recycled, corporations can identify units involved in recycling their packaging and pay them for their services.

EPR: The Ray of Hope

Governments, both central and the states need to pull up their socks and act out on the most basic provisions of EPR that have been spelled out in the laws. At the same time, citizens through civil society groups and pressure groups need to be proactive in demanding accountability from these corporations as well as governments.

At a time when our landfills are overflowing and [oceans are throwing up waste](#) in such massive quantities, manufacturers assuming social and moral leadership in managing their waste is the solution we need.



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