

Why Waste Trash

March 2017

In 2011, the Plastic Waste (Management and Handling) Rules directed that producers of plastics, particularly plastic bags and the kind of packaging we see in chips and cookies (popularly known as multilayered), take responsibility for its disposal under the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) clause.

Nothing happened. The big brands were silent.

Then, in 2016, the laws were revised. The EPR clause remained, although it was somewhat diluted. A year later, the big brands have still not done anything, not to mention any smaller brands. We still see Lays chips trash in the serene freshly born river waters. We still see shampoo sachets on the mountainside belonging to Proctor and Gamble, Hindustan Unilever, Johnson and Johnson and food packets from Dabur, Pepsi, Coca Cola, etc. Cookie wrappers from Nestle, ITC, Britannia and Cadbury fly by in the gentle coastal breeze. Not to mention the drains clogged all over.

And that's only half the problem. Plastic bags are another, out-of-control problem for which we haven't found a pan-Indian redressal, apart from this Rule.

For over two decades, Indians have rued the plastic bag problem. From about 1995 to 2000, dozens of committees battled the anger of several citizen's groups and municipalities. In the past five years or so, many communities and towns simply banned plastic bags. Think of Haridwar, where, in 2004, not a single plastic bag was available at or around the Railway Station. Nainital was no different, and in Kodaikanal too, plastic bags were rarely ever seen. States acted too, but only on paper. Both Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan banned plastic bags during this period, and both to no effect. Delhi's later ban was upturned by the plastic lobby, rendering yeoman disservice to the nation. The Delhi government is still struggling with the impacts. These days, smaller towns like Maharashtra's Vengurla are getting rid of plastic bags via a ban, earning its Chief Municipal Officer, Ramdas Kokare, the name of Plastic Baba!



So, what have we learned from our adventures in regulating plastics?

First, bans do not seem to be effective in the long run, perhaps because they are dependent on an individual's zeal.

Second, rules remain sterile if they don't get implemented. It is listed second because it is so obvious, it doesn't deserve to be listed first.

Third, awareness has its limitations. It needs to be chased up by action.

Forth, individuals who shun plastics matter, but only in a small way. Too small, unfortunately, to change India's clogged landscape.

Fifth, spot cleaning is well-intentioned, but it doesn't really stop the problem, even in the short term. Plastic, and other waste, will pile up again, because it hasn't been banished from our consumption cycle.



These five reasons, fortunately, are no reason for despair. They do not include two big tools that we must start using right away – fiscal tools to reduce waste and bans on production.

The Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 already state under Rule 15 that no one can get a plastic bag for free – infact, they have to pay an additional amount for each bag. This is rarely implemented. If it was, we might be able to reduce the plastic bags in the environment. When England introduced a cess of 5 p per bag in October 2015, the use of plastic bags dropped by 85% in the first 6 months, according to the Guardian. (ref : <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jul/30/england-plastic-bag-usage-drops-85-per-cent-since-5p-charged-introduced>)

Starting with plastic bags, every single state government should at least begin with implementing this financial aspect of the law.

A cess on multilayered plastic packaging is not too far-fetched either. It should be applied at the point of production on the amount of packaging produced, regardless of how much is consumed finally. Even wasted packaging has to be recycled, after all. The cess should infact be made available for collecting and recycling the waste for all those companies who have not yet acted. One model, elementary as it is, is that of Tetrapak. It has paid for collection of multi-layered cartons and their recycling. While the model continues facing challenges over a decade after its launch, including that it does not have a wide enough impact outside of cities, the fact is, it is a model that has come out of the company's own efforts and can be grown. It is precisely such models that offer a path ahead for others-the cess funds should be used for the collection and recycling of packaging from various brands, across India.

What about the bans?

Chintan is not against a blanket ban on production of plastic bags, across India. We do not believe that this will cause the ruin of wastepickers or workers in the factories. Plastic bags are made from plastic pellets – items which can also be moulded into other products. Registered manufacturers can be assisted to shift to other products by helping them buy other expensive moulds and machinery, or other equipment for other types of manufacturing of non-plastic products. A state-wide ban on usage does not hold ground – that, we have seen.

To stop plastics from replacing good old fashioned mud, soil and grass, India needs to be made of sterner stuff. Its own Rules require it to be.