Source : www.thehindu.com Date : 2018-12-16

MAKING INDIA'S POLLUTERS PAY

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When the Centre published the Plastic Waste Management (PWM) Rules in 2016, a key element of it was "extended producer responsibility" or EPR. The idea of EPR was to make the polluter pay. So, all sellers of plastic packaging were required to, within six months, install a system to collect their waste. Two years later, after much confusion about how EPR sewould work, experts say companies have finally begun to take baby steps.

It's a small start, and not enough to make a dent on the problem of India's annual plastic waste of 7-9 million tonnes (CPCB estimates). Only about 45 companies have submitted their EPR plans to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), whereas the total number of such companies runs into several thousands, according to S.K. Nigam, nodal officer for PWM at the board.

But, there is good news too — over the last one year, the CPCB has begun imposing EPR waste-recovery targets. Plus, it has started listing Producer Responsibility Organisations (PROs), to whom manufacturers can outsource their obligations. These efforts have given a fillip to recycling efforts.

"Things are looking positive," said Richa Agarwal, a research associate in the Waste Management Team of Delhi's Centre for Science and Environment. "The work on EPR has started, but it still has a long way to go."

A survey of 20 companies randomly contacted by *The Hindu* reflects this situation (See box). All the 11 companies that responded to the survey claimed to have recycling programmes, although they did not share numbers. A majority of those who shared numbers had only small-scale or pilot projects. But nearly all had targets to reduce plastic consumption and increase recycling over the next decade.

The idea of EPR is extremely critical to waste management. Today, India's recycling sector is mostly informal, and consists of waste pickers and kabadiwallahs. With little help from municipal bodies, they are able to recycle almost 80% of a type of plastic called Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET). But the system is still inefficient, and almost half of the estimated 7-9 million tonnes of plastic doesn't get picked up by the informal sector. This includes multilayered packaging (MLP) which doesn't fetch waste pickers much money, because it can't be recycled. EPR comes in here because companies can incentivise these workers to recover 100% of waste, including MLPs, said Pinky Chandran, a trustee at Hasiru Dala, a cooperative of waste pickers in Bengaluru. They can also help waste pickers upgrade technologically. For example, waste pickers who run dry-waste collection centres (DWCC) typically need baling machines to pack the plastic compactly. These bales can then be shipped to waste-to-energy plants. Such machinery can be provided under EPR.

Yet, things haven't been smooth since the Union Ministry for Environment and Forests notified the PWM rules. The rules made a reference to EPR, asking "manufacturers, importers and brand owners" of plastic packaging to work out the modalities of a system to recover their waste. But they left room for ambiguity.

It wasn't clear, for example, who was responsible for the waste: was it the producer of plastic film, the company who bought it to make packaging, or the brand owner who finally sold the

packaging? There were other sources of confusion too. The 2016 rules required companies to register their EPR plans with State pollution control boards. But this would mean that companies having a multistate presence would have to register across several States. This ambiguity led to several delays in implementation of the rules, said P.C. Joshi, secretary general at PET Packaging Association for a Clean Environment, an industry body for PET manufacturers. This made submitting an EPR plan a giant task. “It was almost like complying with GST,” Mr. Joshi added.

As a result, not much happened in the year after the rules were notified. Then, in 2018, the Ministry published an amendment to the PWM, which clarified the registration process. It also began recognising PROs on its website. The idea was that these organisations, which are experts at waste management, would undertake EPR on behalf of brands. As of now, only five such PROs are listed on CPCB’s website — Indian Pollution Control Association (IPCA), GEM Enviro Management, NEPRA Resource Management, Nepra Environmental Solutions and Shakti Plastic Industries. Several more have applied, said Dr. Nigam. And brands such as Pepsico, Dabur and Colgate Palmolive have begun using their services.

Another major change this year was that the CPCB began setting targets for waste-recovery, something which didn’t exist before. Each company submitting its EPR plan must now recover 20% of the MLP it produces within a year, and 100% within three. Of course, these rules are only as good as the enforcement. Only about 40 companies have submitted their plans to the CPCB so far, and it isn’t clear how many have done the same with State pollution control boards. In *The Hindu’s* survey, most companies which responded said they had programs, but did not specify numbers. The only company which did, namely ITC, said it recycled 7,000 tons of MLP in 2017, which adds up to 13% of the 52,000 tons of plastic packaging it sells each year.

Still, there remain multiple challenges.

MLP, which is used in everything from tetrapacks to wafer bags and shampoo sachets and generates about 0.6 million tonnes of waste annually, cannot be recycled. For now, it is also irreplaceable, because the multiple layers of paper, plastic and aluminium in it are the only way to keep perishable foods and pharmaceuticals fresh for months at a time.

Though several organisations worldwide are working on replacements, no low-cost alternative is on the horizon as yet. So, what do we do with MLP?

The CPCB recommends that this waste be either used as fuel in cement kilns, or in waste-to-energy plants. However, Ashish Jain, the founder and director of IPCA, pointed out that the only two second-generation waste-to-energy plants in India today, which can process MLPs, are in Delhi. “If someone wants to recycle MLP in Guwahati there is no disposal facility,” said Mr. Jain.

Moreover, not enough cement plants accept MLP as fuel, because the cost of segregation and transport does not make it economical compared to coke. Bengaluru, for example, has been struggling to get kilns to pick up the MLP-based fuel from the city. EPR can play a role here too, with companies subsidising the use of alternative fuels at cement kilns.

It will take several years before all the systems are in place to fully address India’s plastic problem.

“There are thousands of brand owners and producers, and millions of tonnes of plastic waste,” observed Mr. Jain. “This field needs new companies and new entrepreneurs. We need a lot more work to be done.”

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