

HALF DONE: ON THE BAN ON PLASTIC

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

India won global acclaim for its “Beat Plastic Pollution” resolve declared on World Environment Day last year, under which it pledged to eliminate single-use plastic by 2022. So far, 22 States and Union Territories have joined the fight, announcing a ban on single-use plastics such as carry bags, cups, plates, cutlery, straws and thermocol products. Puducherry will implement a ban from March 1. Where firm action has been taken, positive results have followed. A Bengaluru waste collective estimates that the volume of plastic waste that they collect dropped from about two tonnes a day to less than 100 kg. Voluntary initiatives are having an impact in many States, as citizens reduce, reuse and sort their waste. Yet, this is only a small start. Waste plastic from packaging of everything from food, cosmetics and groceries to goods delivered by online platforms remains unaddressed. It will take a paradigm shift in the manner in which waste is collected and handled by municipal authorities to change this. Governments must start charging the producers for their waste, and collect it diligently, which will lead to recovery and recycling. But the depressing reality is that State and local governments are unwilling to upgrade their waste management systems, which is necessary to even measure the true scale of packaging waste.

The Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 are clear that producers, importers and brand owners must adopt a collect-back system for the plastic they introduce into the environment. Although the rules were notified in the same year, amended later and given high visibility by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, not much has been done to take the process forward. At the very least, local bodies should consult manufacturers or importers to assess the problem. Delaying such a measure has created the anomalous situation of small producers of plastics facing the ban, while more organised entities covered by the Extended Producer Responsibility clause continue with business as usual. Such enforcement failure is not an argument in favour of relaxing the prohibition on flimsy plastics that are typically used for under 15 minutes, but to recover thousands of tonnes of waste that end up in dumping sites. Cities and towns need competent municipal systems to achieve this. Again, there is little doubt that plastics play a major role in several industries, notably in the automotive, pharmaceutical, health care and construction sectors. But it is the fast moving consumer goods sector that uses large volumes of packaging, posing a higher order challenge. This calls for urgent action. Governments should show the same resolve here, as they have done in imposing the ban.

Jayalalithaa's death does not deserve to be clouded by murky conspiracy theories

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