

# PICKING OUT PLASTIC: ON RECYCLING AND WASTE MANAGEMENT

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has put 52 producers, brand owners and importers, including big online retailers such as Amazon and Flipkart, and companies such as Patanjali Ayurved and Britannia, [on notice, for failing to take responsibility for their plastic waste](#). These and other entities with a large plastic footprint need to respond with alacrity. It is eight years since the concept of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) was incorporated into the Plastic Waste Management Rules, but municipal and pollution control authorities have failed to persuade commercial giants to put in place a system to collect and process the waste. Tighter rules in 2016 and some amendments two years later put the onus on producers and brand owners to come up with an action plan for the retrieval of waste within six months to a year, but that too failed to take off. Mountains of garbage with a heavy plastic load have been growing in suburban landfills, out of sight of city dwellers. Without determined steps, the crisis is certain to worsen. It should be noted that the retail sector expects e-commerce to grow from about \$38.5 billion-equivalent in 2017 to \$200 billion by 2026. Given the role played by packaging, the waste management problem is likely to become alarming. There is also a big opportunity here, which the trade, municipal governments and pollution control authorities need to see. The two prongs of the solution are packaging innovation that reduces its use by using alternatives, and upscaling waste segregation, collection and transmission.

Recovering materials from garbage should be a high priority, considering that India is the third highest consumer of materials after China and the U.S.; the Economic Survey 2019 estimates that India's demand for total material will double by 2030 at current rates of growth. Plastics may be less expensive than other inputs in manufacturing, but recycling them into new products extends their life and provides a substitute for virgin material. Keeping them out of the environment reduces clean-up and pollution costs. Unfortunately, in spite of legal requirements, municipal and pollution control authorities fail to see this and mostly pursue business-as-usual waste management methods. Recyclable waste is rendered useless when it gets mixed with other articles. Online retailers have not felt compelled to take back the thousands of polybags, plastic envelopes and air pillows used to cushion articles inside cardboard boxes. This is in contrast to more developed markets where they are trying out labels on packages with clear recycling instructions. These companies can form waste cooperatives in India, employing informal waste-pickers. In such a model, consumers will respond readily if they are incentivised to return segregated plastic waste. Making municipal and pollution control authorities accountable is also equally important.

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