

BOON FOR LEAF PLATES, BOWL MAKERS IN HIMACHAL AFTER BAN OF SINGLE-USE PLASTIC

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Going green:Members of a self-help group involved in making leaf plates and bowls at Beindhar village.

The nationwide ban on single-use plastic has come as a boon for local folks, especially women in villages of the hill State of Himachal Pradesh, who are involved in making traditional leaf plates and bowls as the demand for these eco-friendly products is currently on the rise and fetching them improved returns.

To aid the makers of leaf plates and bowls, the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, in collaboration with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), is motivating community groups to prepare leaf plates and bowls using machines instead of doing it manually in order to meet the increasing demand for leaf plates. The ban of single use plastic items has been in place since July 1.

Under a project titled 'Improvement of Himachal Pradesh Forest Ecosystems Management and Livelihoods', the department is also ensuring that there's no shortfall in the supply of quality leaves, by planting specific species such as '*Bauhinia vahlii*' in the forest adjoining the villages of trained community groups.

"Under the project, each community group of average 15 people is being provided a capital cost of Rs. 1,29,000 for setting up the plate-making machine that makes 1,000 plates daily. Machine installation has reduced the drudgery of women in the manual making of these leaf items and improved their production capacity. So far, we have developed around 484 such self-help groups. In June this year, the community groups at Beindhar and Kangu villages in Mandi district prepared 8,000 leaf plates and 4,000 leaf bowls and earned Rs. 38,000 in one month in comparison to an average of Rs. 8,000, which is what a group of similar number of people used to earn monthly," Nagesh Guleria, Additional Principal Conservator of Forests cum Chief Project Director, JICA project, told *The Hindu*.

Twenty-nine-year-old Kusum Devi, from Beindhar village is upbeat as the number of orders for her leaf plates and bowls is gradually increasing. "Earlier we used to work independently and prepare the leaf plates manually. Five of our family members are engaged in making leaf plates. We used to earn around Rs. 3,500 monthly by selling the plates, but now we are working in the group and we are using machines to make plates-bowls. Our income has more than doubled now, though it keeps varying depending on the demand. This month, the demand is far better in comparison to previous months before the ban. The use of plastic plates has stopped and hence demand for our leaf plates is rising. It's good for our business," said Ms. Devi.

Pointing out that so far, the marketing team of JICA has received an advance booking for the supply of 2.5 lakh leaf plates from across the State, Mr. Guleria said all group members are enthusiastic about the ban on single-use plastic and are anticipating a high demand in the upcoming wedding and festival season.

In Himachal Pradesh, usually the leaves of Tor (*Bauhinia vahlii*) are used for making leaf plate and bowl. These plants are found in tropical climate, found in relatively lower areas of the State including Mandi, Bilaspur, Hamirpur and Kangra districts. All over the State, fresh leaf plates are

supplied mostly from manufacturers in the villages of Mandi district, and are used to serve food.

Market potential

Ramesh Chand Kang, the head of 'Jadi Buti' cell of the JICA project, points out that bio-degradable leaf plates possess a potential in national and international market, provided quality and standards are met. "Keeping this in view, we planned a holistic approach of setting up a mechanized facility to maintain standards in manufacturing, capacity building of the community groups, and planting of species like '*Bauhinia vahlii*' in the forest adjoining to villages of trained groups for regular supply of quality leaves. *Bauhinia vahlii* is a vigorous climbing shrub, able to grow onto the top of trees in the forest.

"With increasing demand of leaves after the ban on single use plastic plates, we have started production of 6,000 seedlings in nurseries at Kamand and Bhawana villages in Mandi district for the community plantations, in forests and private land," he said.

Asserting that the invasion of factory-made plastic plates and bowls due to their cheap price and long shelf-life harmed the manufacturers of leaf plates, Mr. Guleria said, "Several local leaf-bowl manufactures had to abandon their traditional businesses of leaf plate and related items with time. Families, without any other option, continued to do the business on order and survived this so-called plastic boom, which has become a serious environmental and health problem."

"With ban on single-use plastic, the situation is also expected to improve environment in Himachal Pradesh better than any other States, keeping in view the many traditional alternatives to replace volumes of plastic plates and bowls with leaf plates and bowls prepared by the village women groups trained under JICA projects and other department initiatives for rural women empowerment," he asserted.

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