

Enforcing a plastic ban in Maharashtra

On Saturday, the Maharashtra government began enforcing a ban on plastic, a decision it announced in March. On World Environment Day, June 5, India was the host nation, with the theme for this year being 'Beat plastic pollution.'

What is the plan?

On March 23, the government issued a notification banning the manufacture, use, transport, distribution, wholesale and retail sale, storage and import of plastic bags with and without handle. The ban also covers disposable products, made from plastic and thermocol (polystyrene), such as single-use disposable dishes, cups, plates, glasses, fork, bowl, container, disposable dish/bowl used for packaging food in hotels, spoon, straw, non-woven polypropylene bags, cups/pouches to store liquid, packaging with plastic to wrap or store the products and packaging of food items and grain material. The ban is not applicable to PET bottles, irrespective of capacity. These bottles, however, should have predefined buyback price ranging from Rs. 1 to Rs. 2, depending on the size, printed on them.

Plastic used for packaging of medicines, compostable plastic bags or material used for plant nurseries, handling of solid waste, plastic bags not less than 50 micron thickness used for packaging of milk (with the specific purpose printed on it), plastic manufactured for export in SEZs and plastic to wrap the material at the manufacturing stage are excluded from the ban. The ban is applicable to manufacturers and consumers as well as the chain in between, which includes shops, hawkers, vendors and offices.

What is the penalty?

Urban and rural civic bodies, Collectors, forest officers, police authorities and Maharashtra Pollution Control Board officials have been empowered to implement the ban and take legal action. The penalty for violating the ban starts from Rs. 5,000 (first offence), Rs. 10,000 (second time) and Rs. 25,000 (third time) with three months in jail. In case one fails to pay the minimum penalty, the civic body can file a prosecution complaint before the court, which will decide the amount to be paid.

Why was this necessary?

Environment experts have been blaming plastic for choking of nullahs in Mumbai and the flooding in parts of the city during monsoons. Yuva Sena president Aaditya Thackeray was one of the first to demand a complete ban on plastic, a demand which was accepted by Shiv Sena leader and Environment Minister Ramdas Kadam. Plastic bag manufacturers approached the Bombay High Court against the decision, but their appeal was turned down. The Federation of Retail Traders Welfare Association, too, has gone to court. A hearing was held on Friday, but the plea was rejected. The State has 2,500 units making plastic bags, employing 56,000 people. They owe nearly Rs. 11,000 crore to banks as of March 31. The Clothing Manufacturers' Association of India has spoken out against the ban, saying the apparel trade employs 30 lakh people in the country and depends on polypropylene for packaging.

What is the alternative?

The State is not directly providing alternatives to banned items and has relied on people for solutions. Urban local bodies, like the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), have invited manufacturers of alternative products to showcase their wares at a three-day exhibition.

What lies in store?

The BMC has trained 250 inspectors for levying penalties. Their list is available on its website, along with that of its 37 collection centres where people can dispose of plastic. While levying penalty, they will be registering the offender's Aadhaar number, PAN number or driver licence number. It has also started a dedicated helpline for door-to-door collection. As on June 21, the BMC has collected 145 tonnes of banned plastic from Mumbai. However, most of this was plastic segregated from regular waste and only a fraction is from the 24 dedicated bins for dumping plastic. This underlines the need for more awareness.

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