

Reduce, segregate: On plastic ban

[Maharashtra's ban on several consumer articles made of plastic](#), introduced after a three-month notice period to industry and users, is an extreme measure. It is naturally disruptive, and Mumbai, famed for its resilience in the face of urban challenges, is trying to adapt quickly. Today, stemming the plastic tide is a national imperative. India hosted this year's World Environment Day and Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a high-profile pledge, to international acclaim, that it would do away with all single-use plastics by 2022. This goal is not yet backed by an action plan so that State governments and local bodies can be in sync. Worldwide, the problem has got out of hand, with only 9% of about nine billion tonnes of plastic produced getting recycled. India has an uninspiring record when it comes to handling waste. It has patchy data on volumes, and even less on what it recycles. This lackadaisical approach is at odds with its ambitious goals. Quite simply, if the Centre and the States had got down to dealing with the existing regulations on plastic waste management and municipal solid waste, a ban would not even have become necessary. Specifications for the recycling of different types of plastics were issued two decades ago by the Bureau of Indian Standards.

To address the global concern that the bulk of India's plastic waste — estimated officially at 26,000 tonnes a day — is being dumped in the oceans, there has to be an effort on a war footing to segregate it at source. The Urban Development Secretary in each State, who heads the monitoring committee under the rules, should be mandated to produce a monthly report on how much plastic waste is collected, including details of the types of chemicals involved, and the disposal methods. Such compulsory disclosure norms will maintain public pressure on the authorities, including the State Pollution Control Boards. But segregation at source has not taken off, as there is little awareness, official support or infrastructure. Even bulk generators such as shopping malls, hotels and offices do not abide by the law. Priority, therefore, should be given to stop the generation of mixed waste, which prevents recovery of plastics. Companies covered by extended producer responsibility provisions must be required to take back their waste. In parallel, incentives to reduce the use of plastic carry bags, single-use cups, plates and cutlery must be in place. Retailers must be required to switch to paper bags. Potentially, carry bag production using cloth can create more jobs than machines using plastic pellets. What needs to be underscored is that plastics became popular because they are inexpensive, can be easily produced and offer great convenience. But, as the UN Environment Programme notes, their wild popularity has turned them into a scourge. Consumers will be ready to make the switch, but they need good alternatives.

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