

Why implementing the ban on plastic in Maharashtra won't be easy

Two days after a ban on plastic came into effect in Maharashtra, Mumbai, India's financial capital, is facing massive waterlogging, thanks to incessant rains since Sunday. Rains choke the city almost every year for the past decade, and one of the main culprits is plastic, which not only clogs the city's archaic storm water drainage system but also destroys natural water sinks such as marshlands, wetlands, lakes and rivers, and contributes heavily to marine pollution around Mumbai. This link between the annual flooding and plastics will hopefully not be lost on the citizens, especially the retail business community, which is protesting the ban on the manufacture, sale and use of plastic bags, disposable plastic spoons, forks, cups, glasses, containers, PET bottles (less than 500 ml), and thermocol.

The Maharashtra government had enough reasons to ban plastic: the state generates 1,200 tonnes of plastic waste every day and Mumbai alone generates 500 metric tonnes, which accounts for nearly 10% of its total waste. In contrast, Indian cities generate 15,000 tonnes of plastic waste per day, of which 9,000 tonnes are collected and processed/recycled, while the remaining 6,000 tonnes go into drains, streets or are dumped in landfills, according to a 2015 report of the Central Pollution Control Board.

However, just banning plastics will not solve the problem. First, implementation of the law will be critical, and Maharashtra would do well to learn from the experience of the 17 states that have already walked down this route.

Second, people would not mind giving up plastic if cheaper alternatives are available in the market. Third, to ensure sustainable alternatives, the central government must encourage innovations and establish facilities that can provide alternatives. Take plastic straw and cutlery, for example. Instead of plastic, bamboo can be used and such products are already available, but at present they are far more costly than their plastic equivalents. This needs to change.

Last, but not the least, big business groups must show initiative to change their packaging. Doing this will be a costly affair, but it has to be done for the well-being of citizens and the environment.

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