

AN EFFECTIVE PLAN TO END THE USE OF PLASTIC

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

Disposable plastic items pose a threat to the planet. While a ban on their use would be unrealistic, we need an action plan that combines nudges with no-nos to tackle the problem

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi told the United Nations General Assembly that India was embarking on a “very large campaign” to get rid of single-use plastic, many assumed that New Delhi was preparing to ban the use of disposable plastic. The government, however, has since clarified that it would rather spread awareness about the menace of plastic, and create plastic-free zones to begin with—around heritage sites, for example. In the absence of sufficient alternatives to this ubiquitous and cheap material, an outright ban would have caused much disruption across the country. While users of some flexible items such as carry bags can easily switch to slightly more expensive material, as many already have, those of hard-plastic products, such as disposable syringes, would have found an overnight switch-over difficult to achieve. Yet, there was no getting away from the fact that plastic poses a serious threat to the planet. Since this oil-derived material is not bio-degradable, careless disposal pollutes the environment in irredeemable ways. Apart from the urban crisis of choked drains and garbage heaps, which can’t be incinerated, we have several species at threat of polymer ingestion. Marine life, in particular, has been suffering since much plastic waste ends up in the sea and in the bellies of aquatic creatures. Micro-particles are increasingly being detected in fish, which puts people at risk of contaminant-caused illnesses.

The government, through its Swachhata Hi Seva campaign launched last month, plans to acquaint Indians with the perils of plastic and ask people to voluntarily reduce its use. In addition, it reportedly intends to ask all states to enforce existing rules against the storage, manufacture and use of some single-use products, such as polythene bags. Many environmentalists want this stricture extended to various other forms of plastic. A wider ban, however, could be a nightmare to implement. This is because hard polymer products pervade our lives, thanks to the low cost of their bulk production, and ridding ourselves of these objects could prove costly.

For any action plan against plastic pollution to be effective, efforts should first be directed at waste disposal mechanisms. These remain archaic. Separation-at-source garbage collection has seen only patchy success in India, and plastic items rarely have separate channels for recycling. Moral suasion could change attitudes here. Perhaps a nudge of some sort could also work, say, with express trash clearance assured to those who put anything “poly” in marked-out bins. Of course, the final disposal will need well-sealed landfills, inspired loosely by burial crypts for spent nuclear fuel-rods. As for institutional and corporate reduction of plastic use, a broad incentive scheme in favour of alternative material could be put in place. The aim should be to defray the financial cost of switching to eco-friendly material. Then there are also various manufacturers who are likely to suffer if the material’s consumption were to drop. They need sufficient time to revise their business plans and move on to other opportunities. As demand begins to decline, a timeline could be declared for the elimination of some categories of plastic use. The indiscriminate use of plastic has caused us enough harm, and action simply has to be taken. On this, there is no doubt. How well the objective is achieved would depend on how well we combine coaxing with coercion to wean the world off plastic.

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