

Phasing Out Single-Use Plastics in India: Will it Work?

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Summary

More than a blanket ban on the use of single-use plastics in India, mass awareness about its devastating effects on environment is effective in stamping out plastic products from the country.

From 2 October 2019, which marked the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and has been celebrated as *Swachhta Diwas* (cleanliness day) since 2014, the government of India has launched a programme for “[phased reduction](#)” and “[put an end](#)” to the use of single-use plastic products such as plastic bags, small bottles, cups, certain types of sachets and [straws](#) etc. in the coming years.

In his Independence Day speech on 15 August 2019, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an appeal to people to eliminate the [use of plastics](#). On 30 September 2019 Modi clarified that the government is campaigning against single-use plastic and not for a plastic-free India, as many have [interpreted](#). Still some confusions remain because there is no clarity on the definition of single-use plastic, as anything below 50 microns falls into [this category](#). On 2 October 2019, the Prime Minister said: “Sanitation, conservation of environment and animals, all these things were dear to Gandhi Ji. Plastic is a major threat to all of them. So, we have to achieve the goal to eradicate ‘single-use plastic’ from the country by the [year 2022](#)”.

In 2018, there were about 359 million tons of total plastics placed in market, which was 3.2 per cent more than 2017. With 30 per cent of the world’s supply of plastics, China is the leading [manufacturer](#). Production in North America also increased in 2018, while Europe saw a decline in plastic production by 4.3 percent in 2018. In the same year, consumption of plastics increased by 0.4 [per cent](#).

In India, according to the Central Pollution Control Board estimates of 2012, around 26,000 tons of plastic are thrown away every day. Of that, 15,600 tons per day, or 60 per cent, is [recycled](#). This recycling rate is three times higher than the global average of 20 [per cent](#). Per capita consumption of plastic in India is near 11 kg, which is less than the global average of [28 kg](#). Per capita consumption of plastics in India is lower than many other countries of the world because of its large population base. The bigger problem is of non-recycled plastics. According to an estimate, about 10,000 tons of plastics per day remain [uncollected and littered](#) on roads, in landfills or in streams.

To control the littering of plastics and manage it, in 2016, the Plastic Waste Management Rules were made by the government of India, stating that all local bodies in India shall take steps to develop and set up “infrastructure for segregation, collection, storage, transportation, processing and disposal of the plastic waste either on its own or by engaging agencies or [producers](#).” It also introduced the Extended Producers Responsibility (EPR) behind which the idea is to make the polluter pay for generating waste. All sellers of plastic packaging were required to install a system

to collect waste within six [months](#). In 2018, the Plastic Waste Management Rules were amended under which rules were laid down to phase out Multi-layered Plastics which are “non-recyclable, or non-energy recoverable, or with no alternate [use](#).”

Unfortunately, many companies do not abide by these rules. In mid-2019, the Central Pollution Control Board had pulled up 52 companies, including Amazon, Flipkart, Danone Foods and Beverages and Patanjali Ayurveda Limited for violating the EPR norms. They had not specified a plan to collect the plastic waste generated from their business activities in [India](#).

Sikkim banned plastics in 1998. . By 2019, out of the 29 states and six Union Territories, 25 had banned its use. By 2 October 2019, other entities have also declared such a ban. The Airports Authority of India has declared 55 out of its 134 airports free from [single-use plastics](#). The University Grants Commission has also written to all universities in the country to take measures to make their campuses free of single-use plastics. Some of the central government ministries have announced that there would be no further use of single-use [plastics in their premises](#). However, in most cases, such bans have been ineffective. For example, Maharashtra imposed a blanket ban on plastic bags, bottles and thermocol [products in 2018](#). Heavy fines were imposed on those who use it; yet the author has seen several people using plastic bags in Mumbai.

From an economic point of view, such plastics are being produced, mainly, by small or medium scale industries which provide jobs to many people. According to an estimate, India’s plastic-processing industry has over 30,000 units with an annual turnover of about Rs 2.25 lakh [crore](#) (about S\$440,516).

In countries like Japan, Germany and the United States, plastics are successfully converted into [fuel](#) while Sweden has the world’s best recycling [system](#). In 2014 in India, Dehradun based Indian Institute of Petroleum, developed a unique process through which plastic waste like polyethylene and polypropylene can be converted into either gasoline or diesel. This technology is capable of converting 1 kg of plastic waste into 750 ml of automotive grade [gasoline](#). In many places in India plastic wastes are recycled to produce fuel.

Recycling is useful but it is not a perfect solution. The other way is to take measures to discourage people to use plastics. Ireland has successfully done so. In 2002, the country passed a plastic bag tax, which was so high that within weeks of its implementation the use of plastic [bags](#) was reduced by 94 per cent.

Instead of imposing high taxes, the government of India has proposed to launch a mass movement to sensitise the public against the use of [plastics](#). However, the success of the mass awareness and sensitization depends on how people perceive and respond to such campaigns.

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