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Single-use plastic ban: Is this the solution to the menace?

Research has shown that India is not the biggest generator of plastic refuse, but it does not recycle such waste efficiently

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The UN defines single-use plastic as items intended to be used only once before they are thrown away or recycled. These include, among other items, grocery bags, food packaging, bottles, straws, containers, cups and cutlery.iStock

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement on Monday that India will put an end to single-use plastic has raised doubts within the industry, when recycling of the waste is India's bigger problem, not the quantity of discarded plastic.

"My government has announced that India will put an end to single-use plastic in coming years. We are committed to development of environment-friendly substitutes and also an efficient plastic collection and disposal method. I believe that the time has come for even the world to say goodbye to single-use plastic," Modi said at the Conference of Parties or COP 14 to battle desertification.

The UN defines single-use plastic as items intended to be used only once before they are thrown away or recycled. These include, among other items, grocery bags, food packaging,

bottles, straws, containers, cups and cutlery. The All India Plastic Manufacturers' Association had earlier urged the government not to follow the UN definition as this would harm the industry and the economy.

On Monday, representatives from the packaged drinking water industry met Ram Vilas Paswan, the consumer affairs minister, and urged him not to include PET bottles in the single-use plastic category.

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh, a former environment minister, told PTI today that he had opposed ban on single-use plastic in his his days as a minister because India's problem was not the quantity of plastic waste it was generating, rather its incapability to process the waste by recycling it more efficiently. He also tagged a media report claiming that a complete ban on plastic by the Modi government was not a good idea when the economy was facing a slowdown.

"As environment minister, I resisted blanket ban on single-use plastic. The plastic industry employs lakhs and the real problem is how we dispose and recycle waste," he said on Twitter. "The ban will only grab headlines, at home and abroad, and mask the Modi regime's true environmental record," he said.

Despite what may seem apparent, India contributes very little to total plastic waste generation in the world. China leads the world in production of plastic refuse, followed by the US, and Germany. According to the study *Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean*, published in 2015 in the journal *Science*, China produced 59.08 million tonnes of plastic waste in 2010, followed by the US which produced 37.83 million tonnes. India contributed only 4.49 million tonnes.

Across the world, most of the plastic that ends up as garbage is material used for food packaging.

The figure may be low for India, but the relatively primitive waste collection system and poor manner of disposal make the country one of the worst performers in unsatisfactory dumping and recycling.

According to the study's calculation of share of plastic waste "mismanaged" by countries globally, India "mismanaged" 1.88 per cent of the total plastic waste globally, as against Brazil, which mismanaged 1.48 per cent, despite producing nearly three times the plastic waste of India at 11.35 million tonnes in 2010. Western Europe, especially countries like Germany, and America cannot be accused of recklessness with plastic dumping and recycling as they do it efficiently.

In a business as usual scenario, India will end up mismanaging 4.17 per cent of the global plastic waste by 2025, the study said.

That what is known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch – the largest accumulation of plastic waste on any ocean’s surface—spans 1.6 million square km, or three times the size of Spain, should be enough to make one understand the scale of the problem at hand.

While the plastic industry has been busy averting a move which can send it into a tailspin, the government has not yet made clear its intention on its plans. “From October 2, we will begin an attempt to collect all that (plastic) waste. Nearly 10,000 tonnes of plastic waste remain uncollected,” minister of environment and forests Prakash Javadekar was quoted as saying by *The Hindu* on Monday. He dismissed any imminent ban on the plastic.

It is true that plastic is a menace, rivers and canals are choked and oceans too bear the brunt of excessive use of plastic.

With such a grim picture ahead, it seems obvious to shun single-use plastic. Not so, says an industry insider this website spoke to, who insisted that lack of viable alternatives and mass reach of plastic makes it an indispensable part of modern life.

“The ban will be extremely costly. Plastic is a common man’s material in India. It is not rich man’s material. You can afford to buy water in glass bottle, not everyone can,” he said. “And there will be to and fro cost for the glass bottle's refilling, washing, transport emission, effects of chemical used for washing, etc. All this will only add to the cost. These things are to be considered,” he said, not wishing to be named.

As a way forward, he advocated for proper collection, segregation of waste and recycling.

The suggestion is not lost on the government and several departments have been devising ways to encourage people towards a more conscientious approach towards garbage collection.

“The plastic ban is not within the jurisdiction of FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India). I think the ministry of environment will take a call on it. Considering its environmental bearing, the FSSAI would want less and less plastic to be used in packaging of food and beverages and exploring alternatives of plastics wherever feasible.... By October 2 we will be launching a *shramdaan* movement,” FSSAI CEO Pawan Agarwal told this website.