



# drishti

## The Big Picture: Eliminating Single Use Plastic

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**Government of India** has laid great emphasis on eradicating single use plastic which has become one of the biggest sources of pollution.

During Independence Day Speech, **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** had urged the people to **take a pledge on Mahatma Gandhi's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on 2<sup>nd</sup> October** to make the **country free of single use plastic**.

### What is Single Use Plastic?

- Single-use plastics, also referred as **disposable plastics**, are commonly used for plastic packaging and intended to be **used only once** before they are thrown away or recycled. These include **grocery (polythene) bags, food packaging, bottles, straws, containers, cups, cutlery** etc.
- Plastic is **so cheap and convenient** that it has replaced all other materials from the packaging industry but it takes hundreds of years to disintegrate.
- It is a huge problem. If we look at the data, **out of 9.46 million tonnes of plastic waste** generated every year in our country, **43% is single use plastic**.

## Key Highlights

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- **Focus** is on the **litter prone single use plastic** like polythene carry bags, disposable cutlery. All packaging including food packaging are kept out of focus for the time being because there is no alternative for them yet.
- Being consumer societies, we **consume plastics** and put it out on the road. **40%** of the uncollected trash stays on the road, **goes into water bodies** where it **leeches out the harmful chemicals and clogs** the waterways.
- **India's per capita plastic consumption is 11 kilogrammes** compared to the **United States**, which is the **world's highest at 109 kilogrammes**, according to figures released by the **Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in 2017**.

### Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI)

- Established in **1927**, FICCI is the **largest and oldest apex business organisation** in India.
- It is a **non-government, not-for-profit organisation**.
- It provides a platform for networking and consensus building within and across sectors and is the first port of call for Indian industry, policy makers and the international business community.

## What are the challenges?

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- **Low value:** These are low value plastics so waste pickers do not collect them and they remain uncollected and littered.
- **Visibility:** Plastic waste is about 8-10% of the total municipal solid waste and just 4% at the landfill sites because all the good plastic is picked up. Single use plastic is just about 10-15% of that 4%, still they can be seen everywhere so it appears to be huge.
- **Collection:** Single use plastics largely remains uncollected. If collected cleanly then there are scopes of recycling or energy recovery (in case of **thermoplastics** specifically) but that is not the case.

- **Inadequacy of data:** We do not have data about the quantity of the plastic littering our roads.
- **Non-biodegradable:** The non-biodegradable nature of plastic adds to the issue as it will never truly disappear, instead it breaks into microplastics and gets into the ecological cycles.
- **Dysfunctional systems:** Our municipal corporations are dysfunctional and at loggerheads with the state governments for resources and funding. They are unable to collect both data on plastic and the litter itself.
- **Unorganised labour:** In plastic collection, mostly unorganised labour is involved without any kind of proper machinery or assorting units.

## How to deal with the plastic slowly, steadily and replace it?

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- **Making single use plastics more recyclable by change in the design and composition** (making multi polymer based packaging less complicated by reducing the polymers) so that it is easy to be broken down while recycling.
- **Looking for viable alternatives with special lifecycle** which should not become a problem in itself when the economy of scale is achieved.
- **Strengthening the collection mechanisms** because any plastic which is collected has value in terms of recycling and energy production.
- **Finding solutions** for those items which are kept out of focus right now.
- **Stopping the habit of littering** through incentives, fines and behaviour change.
- **Taking help of technologies** like **pyrolysis and composite waste management technology** in which segregation is not needed and the plastic with other composite fuels is heated at very high temperature with fast acceleration process. With very less pollution, this process turns the composite wastes into basic elements which can be further used as resources in other sectors.
- **Phasing out and replacing** single use plastics gradually with better sustainable options instead of **banning** it.
- **Putting restraints on the manufacturing guidelines** so that the number of litter prone plastics can be reduced. For example, effective control of polythene pollution can be achieved by increasing its thickness from 30 to 50 microns.
- **Making sure** that whatever plastic is collected, is **recycled** in the most environmentally sustainable way (like energy recovery) and **reused** in making decorative pieces.

## What are the viable options?

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- **Clothes and paper carry bags-** These are simple to make, natural and biodegradable.
- **Aluminium containers-** Aluminium industry has to make products more customer friendly, cheaper and government has to play an active role in that.
- **Glass-** It was used widely before plastic came in so it needs revival.

## Way Forward

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At the policy level, the **concept of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)** has to come in. **More R&D (Research & Development) and finances** for it, are needed to look for sustainably viable options.

### **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)**

- It is a policy approach under which producers are given a significant responsibility – financial and/or physical – for the treatment or disposal of post-consumer products.
- Assigning such responsibility could in principle provide incentives to prevent wastes at the source, promote product design for the environment and support the achievement of public recycling and materials management goals.
- **Government** has to look into it with a **very holistic perspective** while forming policies to take all aspects into consideration and ensure strict implementation of regulations.
- **Economically affordable and ecologically viable alternatives** which will not burden the resources are needed and their prices will also come down with time and increase in demand.
- **Citizens have to bring behavioural change** and **contribute** by **not littering** and **helping in waste segregation and waste management**. Everybody, by doing their bit, can ensure elimination of single use plastic.