

Plastic waste choking Kodaikanal

Plastic waste at Kodaikanal rankled my mind after I returned from a weekend holiday. A signboard there read Kodaikanal is a plastic free zone; but that is far from true. Remote spots requiring Tamil Nadu Forest Department's special permit to visit, were littered with plastic. The serene beauty of forests marred by plastic wrappers and garbage haunted me while attending the solid waste management conference in Chennai!

Packaged items at the Kodaikanal store were of plastic and the salesperson was about to put my purchases into a really thin (read as 'under 40 microns') plastic bag at the checkout! Here's a factoid: 50 per cent of the plastic we use, is used just once and thrown away. The Government of India notified the Plastic Waste Management Rules in 2016 superseding the Plastic Waste Rules set previously in 2011. The minimum thickness of plastic carry bags was increased from 40 microns to 50 microns with jurisdiction beyond municipal areas and covering all villages.

The extended mandate was to achieve the Government's Swacchh Bharat aim. So, what is the fuss about proclaiming a



Leaflines, an eco-entrepreneur, making reusable bags from waste

ban when little is done to make people comply? The "Plastic Bag Ban Map" shows many cities in India which have banned this scourge. If laws to curb waste generation are in place countrywide, what prompts some cities to take an extra step to ban plastics? And further, do they really modify behaviour?

Those who advocate continued use of plastic bags mostly cite convenience, and consider bans a governmental infringement of individual rights. Most atrociously they question if there is sufficient scientific proof to label them harmful! All told, their contention is plastic bags offer several benefits that far outweigh their disadvantages. Of course, plastic bags are lightweight, indestructible and cheap compared to other packaging alternatives. Bags of 50 microns are thicker and recyclable unlike 40 micron thick bags. But, once thin bags are discarded, it makes zero economic sense to pick them up from anywhere. Plastic bags are of polythene

which does not biodegrade easily, which means they cannot be easily broken down by air, sunlight, water and soil.

Imagine, plastic end up everywhere as utter waste; and takes 500 - 1,000 years to degrade! When a product is wreaking the environment globally it seems imperative to seek other options. We could re-use bags when shopping; choose biodegradable bags for litter; and refrigerate food in containers rather than plastic bags. In the short term a strictly enforced ban will impact plastic bag manufacturers but present new opportunities for a new breed of eco-entrepreneurs.

Upcycled bags from tetra packs and other recycled materials are already available in the market today and enjoy a growing customer base. Companies that manufacture reusable bags will create more green jobs and opportunities as well. Whether the Government bans plastic bags and strictly enforces it or not, we have a choice. The pros of going plastic free greatly outweigh the cons. If there is anything that is routinely used which makes one routinely discard plastic that comes along with it; then it makes sense to cease and desist from consuming that product. Act now; protect our Earth.



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