

Maharashtra's War on Plastics to Save the Environment

By

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On 5th June World Environment Day, India was the host nation and the theme “Beat Plastic Pollution.” The World Environment day was a culmination of the yearlong UN campaign to raise awareness and inspire action against Plastic.

Plastics have been littering the land, destroying its fertility, chocking up our rivers and oceans resulting in destruction of marine life. Over a lac marine animals are killed every year around coastal areas. It is estimated that from the 50's onwards 8.3 billion tons of plastic has been generated and every year 12.7 million tons of plastic in the form of bottles ,bags and micro-beads is turning the oceans into plastic soup and killing the sea birds ,turtles, fishes and zooplankton which feed on it .

On 5th June, India did much more than just raising awareness on the damage caused to environment, by announcing at the Delhi meet that by 2022 it would eliminate all single –use plastics in the country. This resolve will drastically reduce the flow of plastics from 1.3 billion people and business in one of the world's largest growing economy.



File photo of Versova Beach from India Today

It was in Mumbai's Versova beach that a Mumbai based lawyer Afroz Shah started the largest beach clean-up in 2015 .It was a herculean effort but it inspired many volunteers and they were able to remove 4000 tons of garbage .Afroz Shah's efforts were recognized by UN which

conferred on him the Champion of the Earth award in 2016, the highest honor on environment, under the category - **Action and Inspiration**.

Shah's efforts were supported by the State Government. **On 23rd March, the Maharashtra Government passed a notification banning single use plastics and Thermocol products which came into effect 3months later, on 23rd June. The Fine for the1st offence is Rs5000.Fine for the 2nd offence is Rs10000.Fine for subsequent offence is Rs25000 and 3 months imprisonment.** For non-compliance with provisions of Maharashtra Non-biodegradable Garbage control Act 2006 offence can be registered in Court.

However in the three months between the notification and effect, very little action to create awareness on the harmful effects of use of plastic on environment were made .Nor was there much action in training stakeholder's such as manufacturers and major consumers regarding alternative methods of storage and packaging. Hence there was panic, especially since the monsoon was in full sway rendering it impossible to carry paper or cloth bags. There was also great discontent regarding loss of livelihood to nearly 3lac people and a loss of business to the tune of 15000 crores!

There was also a great deal of confusion on the items banned and items permissible.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) put up a 3day (22nd -24th June)exhibition at the Sardar Patel National Sports Stadium, displaying alternate methods of packaging, storage and cutlery, with a briefing session on the items banned and items exempted followed by a question answer session.

The items banned are:

Plastic bags –with or without handles.

Disposable plastic items like spoons, forks, cups, glasses, containers

Disposable thermocol items like plates, glasses, bowls and containers

Non-woven polypropylene bags.

Plastic pouches for storing liquids

Plastic wrap used for packaging or storing products

Plastic packaging for food items

Plastic and thermocol decorations

The exempted items:

Plastic bags or plastic used for packaging of medicines

Compostable plastic bags or material used for plant nurseries horticulture, agriculture, handling of solid waste.

Plastic sand plastic bags for export purposes only, in the Special Economic Zones and export oriented units

Plastic cover or plastic to wrap material used at the manufacturing stage or is an integral part of manufacturing.

Plastic raincoats, Plastic pens, Milk pouches above 50microns thickness. Plastic bags used in plant nurseries.

The exhibition had a number of stalls explaining the reuse of plastic bags, availability of biodegradable plastic bags and enviro-friendly solutions of providing alternative to thermocol and plastic plates, forks, spoons, glasses by using areca nut leaf or sugar cane plant crush. Aesthetically made one time use, Clay cups, glasses and sweet bowls were on display. It brought memories of Kulhar chai. Cloth bags and jute bag stalls were galore. Very interesting were the stalls on reuse and recycling of plastic to make plant holders and bags from shredded plastic and the replacement of plastic bags by cloth bags prepared from old saris. It was back to the age of the fifties – the thrifty times of our mothers and grandmothers when bags and vegetable wrappers were made from old, used cloth. NGO's providing collection of old sari and other material, preparing customized bags and delivering them at an affordable cost had put up a stall .The bags on display from old brocade and silk saris could make attractive gifts.

Switching from the cheap and convenient plastic bags which had become a part of daily life will take time and resources. But considering the damage to the environment and sustainability to life extra effort is required. Observing the crowds in the exhibition I could gauge the enthusiasm for finding an alternative to the plastic bags. But the government needs to do more for better implementation as also to ensure that bribery and corruption don't result in harassment. More training for alternate employment to those rendered jobless would go a long way to enlist support to this movement.

So the message is clear: we have to fight plastic on a war footing through the 5R's (Refuse ,Reduce Reuse repurpose and recycle. The Recycling is the last option- the first is to Reduce for which the Ban is the first step...