

sundaystory

The Cost Of Convenience: Plastic

Awareness high but use higher in era of apps

It is 11pm. You have finished dinner and it's bedtime. But there's the series you were watching you must get back to. Just one episode, you think. When you check the time next, a few hours have passed. Dinnertime seems like a long time ago. You scramble for your phone and order pasta from a late-night eatery listed on a food app. Soon, the doorbell rings. You are handed warm food in a plastic container, tightly sealed with a sheet, again made of plastic, both of which you throw in the dustbin immediately after finishing what is inside along with the plastic cutlery it came with.

The internet is convenient; buying is so easy that you can order a bottle of cola or an entire refrigerator without having to get out of bed. But this convenience, almost always, comes wrapped in plastic packaging. Millions of Indians, always connected to the ecosystem of home deliveries through apps on their smartphones, are generating more plastic waste than ever.

This is a worldwide trend, illustrated by a 2017 US study that found 44% of all plastic ever produced has been made since 2000. And 90% of this is packaging material, which no one is quite sure what to do with once its purpose is served. At the same time, environment occupies public consciousness like never before, polythene bags are being banished from homes as an ecological obligation, and the PM's call has spurred a national awakening against single-use plastic.

It's the plastic paradox of our times — the consumption frenzy fuelled by the same tools of empowerment, the internet and the smartphone, that have given ecological awareness unprecedented reach.

TIMES POLL

Which is the best way for the city to reduce plastic waste?

- Enforce waste segregation at all homes (dry and wet)
- Properly implement ban on plastic bags
- Start a robust recycling programme
- Crack down on single-use plastic
- Start awareness programmes that reach every house



we use. It has basically infiltrated our lives," says Swati Singh Sambyal from the Centre of Science and Environment, who has been studying the use of plastic and its consequences in people's lives. She adds that according to an assessment, per capita consumption of plastic by Indians is 11 kg/annum. The number is much less compared with developed countries but it is growing.

In a blog last September, Deepinder Goyal, CEO and founder of the Gurgaon-based food tech aggregator, Zomato, said the industry accounts for 35-40 million orders a month, which add up to 22,000 tonnes of plastic waste every month. "We realise the impact of packaging material on the environment, we have launched a 'don't send cutlery' option on the app to cut down on single-use plastic and are also approaching this issue from the restaurant side," says Rajesh Ranjan, VP, food delivery, Zomato. They have also been trying to introduce paper-based packaging material, he adds.

Sunil Pachar, who works with many RWAs in the city for waste management, says packaging of FMCG products is one of the most dangerous, yet highly neglected categories. "We talk about polythene bags but they do not constitute even 5% of our total plastic consumption. Biscuit wrappers or chips packets and even bottles used for mineral water are all single-use plastics that are extremely harmful and need urgent attention in terms of disposal," says Pachar.

Most Indian cities, including Gurgaon, are still struggling to create a recycling framework. As a result, plastic waste reaches landfills, clogs drains and flows into rivers, insidiously polluting the environment. According to the

There is a giant ecosystem tailored for home deliveries to which our phones connect us, and the convenience of the internet means this is an industry growing at ferocious pace. And so is plastic use because everything we order comes in some form of packaging. This is happening simultaneously with growing awareness about plastic's ills and talk of waging a war against it. **Shubhra Pant & Shilpy Arora** decode the habits and ground realities fuelling this plastic paradox



Visual: Sajeev Kumarapuram

HOW MUCH PLASTIC WASTE CAN YOU GENERATE IN A DAY?



THE BIG, BAD PLASTIC HEAP

25,940 tonnes How much plastic waste is generated every day in India. This is about the weight of 9,000 Asian elephants

1,100 tonnes household waste/day in Gurgaon

25 lakh tonnes waste lying at Bandhwari treatment plant

11 lakh tonnes How much of legacy waste at Bandhwari treatment plant is non-biodegradable, including plastic

10 years How long it takes to degrade plastic and silicon coating from paper pulp and sugarcane bagasse used as 'plastic alternatives' at eateries

Additional products are mixed with food grade plastic to give it properties such as UV-resistance. This makes it all the more unfit for recycling, says Raagini Jain, a solid waste management expert

After use, what? No one really has a plan

Plastic wouldn't have posed such huge a threat to the environment if we, the producers, were sincere in our efforts to tackle it after use. Studies show 60% of the total plastic waste can be recycled if segregated. But despite awareness, much of the plastic that is used to package the things we consume, is littered, making recycling an uphill task.

We see the result in the biscuit wrappers that dot our pristine, hilly trekking trails and the empty plastic bottle that comes floating to us at remote beaches. It also chokes our drains and releases greenhouse gases, causing occasional fires at landfills, states a report, "Challenges and Opportunities, plastic waste management in India", released by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) in 2018. "Processing the plastic used in food packaging (food grade plastic) is especially difficult, according to Raagini Jain, a solid waste management expert who has worked at the Bandhwari waste treatment plant in the past and is currently associated with the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

There are three hurdles, she says. Firstly, only virgin plastic is safe for food packaging. An increased demand means more plastic is being produced. Secondly, after recycling, food grade plastic can't be used for food packaging again, as per law. So, a PET bottle (the ones we get our fizzy drinks in) cannot be used for PET bottle manufacturing after degrading. Finally, and most importantly, additional products are mixed with food grade plastic to give it properties such as UV-resistance. This renders it all the more unfit for recycling.

Bags and cutlery made of 'plastic alternatives' like paper mesh and starch, too, are coated with plastic or silicone, adds Jain. "It takes more than 10 years to degrade the plastic and silicon coating from the paper pulp waste and sugarcane bagasse in order to recycle. These products are not truly eco-friendly," she says.

"Since segregation at source is a challenge, contaminated plastic doesn't get recycled and ends up in dumpsites," shares Swati Sambyal, programme manager (waste) at the Centre for Science and Environment. The route that waste takes from our homes is this: It is picked up from the doorstep and carried to transfer stations in Beri Wala Bagh, Chandpur, Atul Kataria Chowk and near Paras Hospital in Sushant Lok 1. Here, it is segregated into biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste and dumped at dumpsites in the Bandhwari waste treatment plant.

Ecogreen Energy Private Limited, the private company hired by the Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon (MCG) in 2017 to manage waste, says while wet waste can be composted, the plastic that includes plastic could be used to produce energy. "We are still waiting for environmental clearance to set up the WTE and composting plants at Bandhwari landfill site," says a representative of Ecogreen. The company claims about 50-60 tonnes of plastic waste reach the Bandhwari landfill every day. "Only about 5-6% of the total waste that comes from Gurgaon is plastic waste," says Rajesh Kurup, COO, Ecogreen.

Experts, however, say believe the number is bigger. "It must be 7-15%," according to Sambyal, who adds that most of the recyclable plastic are taken by the informal sector and channelled.

Apart from the daily inflow, a huge pile of legacy waste is lying at the plant in Bandhwari. An estimate puts it at 25 lakh tonnes or more. Out of this, over 11 lakh tonnes is non-biodegradable, including plastic. Activists have been criticising this delay in clearing the backlog. "It is not rocket science to segregate waste. Accumulation will lead to degradation of the quality of non-biodegradable waste, making it less recyclable with each passing day," says Vivek Kamboj, an environmental activist.

Segregation at the primary level is another way and probably the first step to an efficient plastic waste management system. "A large part of the plastic waste we collect is not contaminated and our vendors easily recycle it to block tiles to produce energy. The same model can be followed for household waste management," says Seema Das Petra from Enviro, a private company that manages waste for over 200 commercial establishments in the city.

Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016, applicable to all states, plastic bags less than 50 microns in thickness, are prohibited. Some states also have specific bans for single-use plastic but these bans are not implemented.

"The country needs a clear definition and policy on the phase-wise ban of single-use plastics. Not all plastics are bad but items such as plastic cutlery and bags can be easily replaced with alternatives," says Sambyal.

In the meantime, heightened awareness and private enterprise is a silver lining. The municipal corporation says a large volume of waste from multinationals is being recycled in a decentralised manner while some RWAs are ensuring they segregate all waste, making recycling easier. "Plastic needs to be segregated, cleaned and dried before it can be recycled and

hence, something like a straw is almost impossible to recycle despite segregation," says Smita Ahuja, a member of the Citizen Monitoring Committee formed by MCG, pointing out the difficulties in reusing plastic.

Small steps like packaging food in material other than plastic, many feel, can make a big difference. Monika Khanna Gulati, another member of the Citizen Monitoring Committee, adds, "For alternatives, we need to revisit the time when throwaway plastic wasn't an option. Restaurants can give reusable steel dabbas by keeping some security money and exchange it on the next visit. Dry food items could be given in bagasse, leaf or jute packaging or transferred to a client box or container. Food startups should be rated in terms of their sustainability initiatives at a national level."

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/the-cost-of-convenience-plastic/articleshow/70930076.cms>

The cost of convenience: Plastic

Shubhra Pant & Shilpy Arora | TNN | Updated: Sep 1, 2019, 10:17 IST



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Indian households collectively generate nearly 26,000 tonnes of plastic waste every day. Food is a generous contributor. Last year, 24.6 crore packaging units were sold across five categories in the country — food, beverages, beauty and personal care, dog and cat food, and home care — according to data shared by Euromonitor International, a market research company. Food packaging alone accounted for 23.5 crore units.

"Plastic is everywhere, in the package of the food we eat, the articles we order online, the rim of our spectacles, our utensils, several single-use plastic products that we use. It has basically infiltrated our lives," says Swati Singh Sambyal from the Centre of Science and Environment, who has been studying the use of plastic and its consequences in people's lives. She adds that according to an assessment, per capita consumption of plastic by Indians is 11 kg/annum. The number is much less compared with developed countries but it is growing.

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