

Single-Use Plastic Ban in India

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[GS Paper 3 - Environmental Pollution and Conservation]

Context - The Centre has banned the use of 'single-use plastic' from July 1. The Ministry for Environment, Forest and Climate Change had issued a gazette notification last year announcing the ban, and has now defined a list of items that will be banned from next month.

The manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of such plastic, including polystyrene and expanded polystyrene commodities shall be prohibited with effect from the 1st July, 2022.

About Single-Use Plastic

- As the name suggests, it refers to plastic items that are used once and discarded. Single-use plastic (SUP) has among the highest shares of plastic manufactured and used — from packaging of items, to bottles (shampoo, detergents, cosmetics), polythene bags, face masks, coffee cups, cling film, trash bags, food packaging etc.
- It accounts for a third of all plastic produced globally, with 98% manufactured from fossil fuels.

- SUP also accounts for the majority of plastic discarded – 130 million metric tonnes globally in 2019 all of which is burned, buried in landfills or discarded directly into the environment.
- On the current trajectory of production, it has been projected that single-use plastic could account for 5-10% of greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.
- India features in the top 100 countries of single-use plastic waste generation – at rank 94 (the top three being Singapore, Australia and Oman).
- With domestic production of 11.8 million metric tonnes annually, and import of 2.9 MMT, India's net generation of single-use plastic waste is 5.6 MMT, and per capita generation is 4 kg.

What are the banned Items?

- According to the Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016, there is also a complete ban on sachets using plastic material for storing, packing or selling gutkha, tobacco and pan masala.
- The items on which the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) have announced a ban are earbuds; balloon sticks; candy and ice-cream sticks; cutlery items including plates, cups, glasses, forks, spoons, knives, PVC banners measuring under 100 microns among others.
- The Ministry had already banned polythene bags under 75 microns in September 2021, expanding the limit from the earlier 50 microns. From December, the ban will be extended to polythene bags under 120 microns.
- The ban is being introduced in phases to give manufacturer's time to shift to thicker polythene bags that are easier to recycle. While manufacturers can use the same machine for 50- and 75-micron bags, the machinery will need to be upgraded for 120 microns.

Reasons behind the Ban

- The choice for the first set of SUPs items for the ban was based on difficulty of collection, and therefore recycling. The enemy is not that plastic exists per se, but that plastic exists forever in the environment.

- When plastic remains in the environment for long periods of time and does not decay, it turns into microplastics – first entering our food sources and then the human body, and this is extremely harmful.
- These items are difficult to collect, especially since most are either small, or discarded directly into the environment – like ice-cream sticks. It then becomes difficult to collect for recycling, unlike the much larger items.
- The largest share of SUP is that of packaging – with as much as 95% of single use belonging to this category – from toothpaste to shaving cream to frozen foods.
- The items chosen are of low value and of low turnover and are unlikely to have a big economic impact, which could be a contributing reason.

Enforcement of the Ban

- The ban will be monitored by the CPCB from the Centre, and by the State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) that will report to the Centre regularly.
- Directions have been issued at national, state and local levels – for example, to all petrochemical industries – to not supply raw materials to industries engaged in the banned items.
- Directions have also been issued to SPCBs and Pollution Control Committees to modify or revoke consent to operate issued under the Air/Water Act to industries engaged in SUP items.
- Last week, the CPCB issued one-time certificates to 200 manufacturers of compostable plastic and the BIS passed standards for biodegradable plastic.
- Those found violating the ban can be penalized under the Environment Protection Act 1986 – which allows for imprisonment up to 5 years, or a penalty up to Rs 1 lakh, or both.
- Violators can also be asked to pay Environmental Damage Compensation by the SPCB. In addition, there are municipal laws on plastic waste, with their own penal codes.

Other Countries Dealing with SUPs

1. Bangladesh became the first country to ban thin plastic bags in 2002.
2. New Zealand became the latest country to ban plastic bags in July 2019.
3. China issued a ban on plastic bags in 2020 with phased implementation.
4. As of July 2019, 68 countries have plastic bag bans with varying degrees of enforcement.
5. Vanuatu and Seychelles have banned plastic straws outright.