

# 'If production of alternatives increases, the cost will automatically come down'

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The businesses of street vendors, other small shops, including grocery stores, restaurants and others will dip as the ban stops all forms of plastic packaging done by them, whereas, it allows packaging of MNCs and FMCGs, claims Tamil Nadu Plastic Manufacturers' Association...

We need to understand that the quality of food is also important. We're a country where different things are produced in different states. They need to be packed safely to move them from one location to another. So, such products need to be packed in some material, which could be metal, glass or food-grade plastic. The food-grade plastic is allowed as per the Food Safety and Standards Act. The multi-layered plastic is also permitted as per the Act. And this can be done at the manufacturer's end. The pollution control board has also taken a decision to allow it for the time being. It's not going to be a permanent solution. We're also looking at how we can bring in Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). So, all these multi-national companies will also be made responsible for the waste they generate. Now, we are organising regional conferences in different parts of the state. The first one was held in Coimbatore last week, where we invited all the stakeholders to talk one on one and clarify all their concerns. Salem and Chennai belong to my region and I'll be participating in conferences held in both the places. Apart from this, district collectors are organising workshops for stakeholders, making them understand what the government is planning to do and why everybody should participate in this.

**Some manufacturers point fingers at consumers, saying plastic doesn't litter by itself...**

It's just like the argument of whether the chicken came first or the egg. According to me, both have to change. We are sometimes too lazy to carry a cloth bag when we leave our homes and suddenly decide to go shopping. After you are at the shop, you have no other choice and you end up asking for a plastic carry bag. We should change that attitude. I always carry cloth bags with me for the last two to three years. Once that behavioural change happens, we don't even need a ban. The demand will automatically drop.

**The figures highlighted by the plastic manufacturers' association on the number of small and medium-sized enterprises that'll be forced to shut down, investments and loans becoming idle and people losing jobs seem to be quite humongous after the ban comes into effect. What's your take on this?**

I think, these figures are of the entire plastic industry in Tamil Nadu. Again, I am telling you that we're only targeting avoidable, single-use plastic materials. That's only a small percentage of the entire plastic industry.

Now, there's a plea in the Madras High Court to quash the state govern-

**permanent alternative to plastic?**

See, many countries have gone through this phase of banning certain things at one point of time. For a behavioural change, you go for an intermediate alternative and then, turn to the next one. For example, in Scandinavian countries, they don't use paper covers, people carry their own containers. In fact, when I was a child, I remember, there wasn't any packaging done in shops. I had to carry my own containers for oil, dal, etc. Even milk, we would buy in stainless steel *paathram*. We need to get back to our old practices we had 20 to 30 years ago. Now, in many countries, they have vending machines for grocery and people get them in their own containers. Using materials made of paper is only a transition solution. It may not be a permanent solution.

**Another contention is whether cloth is biodegradable or not...**

We need to understand that cloth may not be as harmful as plastic. Cloth can at least be recycled. For instance, you have a good cloth bag and you use it for some time. Then, once it is not good to carry around, you cut it into small pieces and use it for different purposes — cleaning your house or motorbike. You're not going to throw it off like single-use plastic.

**There are also concerns that alternatives to plastic seem expensive...**

Everything has a cost attached to it. And somebody has to pay for it. Meanwhile, if the production of alternatives increases on a mass scale, the cost will automatically come down. When plastic covers initially came in the market, they weren't given for free. So, the cost of alternatives will also come down gradually. When we have mass production for T-shirts in Tiruppur, why not for this. Now, there's no market for cloth bags, that's why they are expensive.

**BEING A FOOD SAFETY COMMISSIONER, I AM ALSO CONCERNED ABOUT THE QUALITY OF FOOD PEOPLE CONSUME. SOME OF THESE ITEMS THAT ARE USED FOR PACKING ARE CARCINOGENIC**



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