Vendors, restaurants see business slip away

They have lost around 25-30% of their takeaway traffic after the ban on single-use plastics took effect

LIFE AFTER BAN

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What is a drink of tender coconut water or a cold mocktail without a straw? With the ban on single-use plastics, tender coconut sellers and restaurants are struggling to find replacements for straws and plastic cups, integral to their businesses. Small shops and vendors have lost around 25-30% of their business that used to come from takeaways.

Muthukumar, who runs a juice shop in T.Nagar, said that his customers were comfortable with drinking juice without a straw.

But he is facing challenges when it comes to home delivery. "We are planning to deliver juice in glass bottles. But we need to get the bottles back as each costs ₹30-₹50. I charge ₹30 per cup of juice. So the math will not work and I will lose money."

Solution in sight: Chennai-based Eco Coatings Pvt. Ltd uses a water-based coating to make paper cups, straws and boxes, which can be a replacement for plastics. • B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Dwindling clientele

Manigandan. R, a coconut vendor on Anna Salai, has started serving tender coconut water in steel tumblers.

"My regular customers are not comfortable drinking from these tumblers and a few have even stopped coming. For customers who like to carry the coconut and eat it later, I'm wrapping it in paper, but it gets soggy quickly."

Acceptance by customers of stainless steel tumblers has been an issue, said sugarcane juice seller Ramu and tender coconut vendor Esaki. Some customers ask for plastic cups and go away. Both have lost at least half of their daily business due to absence of an agreeable alternative to plastics.

Meanwhile, star category hotels have completely changed whatever plastics they used and have shifted to cloth bags, compostible straws, paper boxes with wax coating, and ceramic/bamboo/wooden stirrers. Shabin Sarvotham, Senior General Manager, Hotel Grand by GRT at T. Nagar, said the shift has cost them a fair bit.

"We use around 300-400 straws daily since we need to serve them along with soft drinks, mocktails and during banquets too. We are now spending ₹1.70 per paper straw," he explained.

The alternative?

Chennai-based Eco Coatings Pvt. Ltd., run by Chandraganti Subba Rao, has come up with an alternative for all paper products, including straws, cups and boxes for packing food stuff.

"Using a water-based coating solution from a 95-year-old German company, which we modified to suit our needs, we make paper cups, straws, boxes and even plates that can be re-pulped and directly composted in our gardens. As far as the cost is concerned, it is a few paise more than plastic-coated ones," explained Mr. Rao, who has been supplying these cups to companies in Austria and passed on the technology to paper mills in Thailand and Korea.

"We began the coating for paper mills since they import pulp. With our coating, the paper can be re-pulped, which will reduce foreign exchange," he added.

Certified for safety

His company has been certified by the National Toxicology Centre, which is approved by the US' Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The products were found to be biodegradable. Tamil Nadu consumes around 3,000 tonnes of paper cups every month.

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