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Our Plastic Pollution Problem

We take the suffocation warning on plastic bags seriously, keeping these out of the reach of children, but we haven’t been as mindful of our planet. Urmi A Goswami reports

The use of plastic is ubiquitous everywhere, in our wallets, on our dining tables and kitchens, in our cars and buses and in our phone offices. It is nearly impossible to imagine a world without plastics. From its beginning in 1960, global plastic production has increased dramatically from 4 million tonnes to 300 million tonnes in 2015. Its sheer convenience—lightweight and durable—has made it an essential material in every sphere of human existence. In the last 70 years, 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic have been produced. We almost always take the suffocation warning on plastic bags and packages seriously, keeping plastic out of reach of babies and children. But we have not been as mindful of the planet. Of the 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic produced, 6.8 billion tonnes have been discarded. Every year, nearly 13 million tonnes of plastic waste are added to oceans. Given their durability, plastics do not decompose.

“A plastic bottle takes between 450 to 1,000 years to decompose,” explained Environment Minister Harsh Vardhan. Much of the growth in plastic production is driven by single-use, disposable applications. Nearly 50% of plastics are single-use products such as bottles, plastic bags, packaging, straws, strimmers, spoons and forks. Around the world, 1 million plastic drinking straws are purchased every minute. Every year, we use up trillions of disposable plastic items.

“Why do we have so much plastic waste? It’s because we’re not thinking about the environment. The destruction of ocean ecosystems, threat to lives of cattle and pollution of public spaces must be stopped,” says Amitabh Gosh, chief sustainability officer, Mahindra Group.

In India, 80% of total plastic consumption is discarded as waste and official statistics say the country generates 25,940 tonnes of plastic waste daily. At least 40% of this is uncollected.

The use of plastic packaging has rigid and flexible forms and has increased over the years. In many places, the packaging is not effectively disposed of or collected, leading to environmental and health issues. Plastic waste ends up in landfills, rivers and oceans, and even in the bodies of animals.

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The Indian plastic industry is among the fastest growing ones. According to a 2017 knowledge paper by PCIPEL, a business and industry lobby, Indian plastic processing industry saw compounded annual growth rate of 19% between 2010 and 2015. Annual plastic consumption is expected to increase from 12 million tonnes to 20 million tonnes by 2022. Given the projected increase in consumption, PCIPEL’s Panjwani stresses considering the possibility of introducing changes at the product design stage that facilitate easy collection, sorting and subsequent recycling. Increased consumption means use of plastics for packaging. Panjwani says “ideal packaging should be designed to use the minimum amount of resources for purpose and once it has completed its job, the scope for recovery maximised.”

There has been an effort to encourage the use of alternative and efficient packaging. The use of 100% biodegradable plastic products has been encouraged. However, this is not enough to address the issue of plastic pollution. The government is required to make regulations banning the use of single-use plastic products.