

The carrybag culture

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The news that 'Rajasthan bans plastic carry bags' (*The Hindu*, July 27, 2010) does spread some cheer as most of us are so used to carrybags and find it hard to let them go.

Decades ago, the story was different. People carried small steel *dabbas* to hotels to bring home the *idli* and *sambar*. The buzzword now is technology and convenience. Today even *sambar* and *sam* are packed into thin, plastic carrybags.

The popularity of these bags has grown manifold, thanks to retail chain outlets and malls. Customers trek out with purchases tucked into myriad carrybags of various sizes and hues which, in turn, come in handy to dispose of trash someday, and the vicious cycle continues.

Be it the roadside vendor, the dhaba, the garment shop, the bookshop, the toy store, the neighbourhood grocery store or those small local shops selling cigarettes which dot every streetcorner, a plentiful stock of these easy-to-carry plastic bags is kept ready-at-hand. The average shopkeeper views it as good for the business. The aim is to keep the customer happy.

With the introduction of these cheaply priced carrybags, the very process of garbage disposal is superfast. Earlier, people trudged to the roadside trash bin lugging their brimming household dustbins. In contrast, the modern citizen dumps his garbage into plastic carrybags which, in turn, fly into the trash bin!



Consider this. India's population is estimated to touch 1.2 billion in 2011. Even if we suppose that less than a quarter of the population disposes of garbage once a day via the plastic carrybag, the total number of such bags in the country's garbage would be mind-boggling. And, mind you, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Mindset should change

Why is the degradation of the environment on the increase? Pointing an accusing finger at plastic carrybags is not the answer. The problem lies with the people. Our mindset has been conditioned to follow the herd. We need to think for ourselves, not look askance at others. The onus is on each individual to reduce the usage.

Much has been written about recycling plastic and I guess Alexander Parkes, who invented the world's first plastic in 1855, would never have believed even in his wil-

dest dreams that the ubiquitous plastic carrybag or plastic cover as it is known would have environmentalists up in arms.

Recycling alone will not resolve the issue considering our population growth rates and the quantum of plastic waste. Recycling, combined with a reduction in plastic usage, will make a positive difference.

"From Bangalore to Boston, Indian scientists, engineers and thinkers are generating ideas and prosperity that improves and saves lives across India and the globe." The above statement by American President Barack Obama is proof enough that India has come a long way. But, strangely, as a nation we lag behind in cleanliness. The first thought that strikes any visitor to our country is the garbage on the street. And a sizeable chunk of this garbage is plastic in form. Already, the green brigade has begun pressing the

panic button. So where does the fault lie? Do we lay the blame on inadequate garbage clearance services? The truth is that municipal corporations and local bodies in cities and towns are struggling to cope with the burgeoning population.

Today, we find that even unlettered and semi-literate sections are comfortable with gadgets such as the mobile phone. Such being the case, surely, it is not impossible for us to unlearn habits. A conscious and concerted effort cutting across the socio-economic divide is the need of the hour. It's a question of learning to shun the plastic carrybag and stop trashing it. Modern technology should be at the forefront to wage this battle. Convey the message using blogs, SMS, twitter, YouTube, social networking sites and the like. We need to retrieve those 'jholna' bags, clothbags and jute bags gathering dust in our cupboards.

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Plastics are forever, ill-effects too

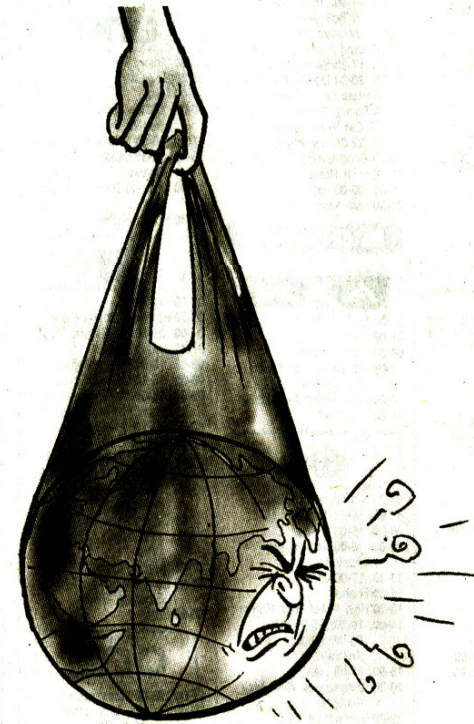
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The major chemicals that go into the making of plastic are highly toxic and pose a serious threat to living beings of all species on earth. Some of the constituents of plastic such as benzene and vinyl chloride are known to cause cancer, while many others are gases and liquid hydrocarbons that vitiate earth and air. Plastic resins themselves are flammable and have contributed to several accidents worldwide.

The noxious substances emitted during the production of plastic are synthetic chemicals such as ethylene oxide, benzene and xylenes. Besides hitting hard the ecosystem, which is already fragile, these chemicals can cause an array of problems ranging from birth defects to cancer and damage the nervous and immune systems. And, many of these toxic substances are also emitted during the recycling of plastic.

Disposal of plastic is a myth. Once it is produced, the harm is done once and for all. Plastic defies all kinds of attempt at disposal — be it through recycling, burning, or landfilling. Plastic bags are non-biodegradable, as they do not get decomposed even after many years.

Once plastic bags are used, they become litter, and they find their way into our waterways, parks, beaches, and streets. And, if they are burned, they infuse the air with toxic fumes. Many animals ingest plastic bags, mistaking them for food, and therefore die. And worse, the ingested bag remains intact even after the death and decomposition of the animal.



Thus, it lies around in the landscape where another victim may ingest it.

Petroleum is used to produce plastic bags. As it is, petroleum products are diminishing and becoming expensive by the day. Petroleum is vital for our modern way of life. Without viable alternative sources of energy on the horizon, if the supply of petroleum were to be turned off, it would lead to practically the whole world grinding to a halt. Hence, we should not waste this precious resource to produce plastic bags.

While there should be a

strict ban on plastics, considering its ill-effects on the human beings and the environment, people should desist from accepting material in plastic bags. Textile showrooms and vendors/hawkers must be told in no uncertain terms that they should replace plastic bags with eco-friendly jute/paper/cotton bags.

Non-compliance must be taken seriously and fine imposed. Spot fine must be imposed on those who carry plastic bags. It is time we waged a war on plastic products.

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