

Banned SUPs continue to flood the market in India

A new study reveals insights into single-use plastic ban implementation in Indian cities

Mumbai: A year after India's ban on select single-use plastic products, a new study by Toxics Link titled "Single Use Plastic Ban in India" found widespread use of the restricted plastic products in five Indian cities: Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Guwahati, and Gwalior, especially in local stores and markets. Select single-use plastics (SUPs) were prohibited on July 1 of last year, however, it appears that a lot of that restriction has just been on paper. This clear infringement puts severe uncertainty on India's efforts to reduce plastic pollution.

The new study indicated that all banned SUPs, except for plastic stirrers and plastic ice cream sticks, were in use in all the surveyed cities. Restrictive carry bags, ('less than 120 microns'), were the most commonly available banned item, across cities, with 64% of survey points still using them. Despite the availability of viable alternatives, other products including thermocol decorations (74%), balloons (60%), and plastic stick earbuds (60%) continued to be sold in all cities. The lowest compliance percentage was recorded in Delhi (88%), followed by Gwalior (84%), Mumbai (71%), and Guwahati (77%). Although significant, Bengaluru had the least usage of SUPs among the surveyed cities (55% of the surveyed points were still using banned SUPs). The continuing availability of SUPP in such high percentages of the surveyed points across all five cities, months after the ban, indicates serious concerns.

India implemented a statewide ban on specific SUPs beginning on July 1, 2022, in order to protect human health and fight environmental degradation. The impact of the prohibition in reducing the usage of SUPs, which are known for their low utility and great potential for littering, is thoroughly evaluated in this study. In an exhaustive survey completed throughout five cities in India from March to June 2023, 700 survey points were analysed across 23 distinct types of locations. Local street food vendors, tiny restaurants, railway stations, wholesale markets, malls, and tourist attractions were included.

Though malls and metro stations show strong adherence to the ban, the study finds that shopping markets, weekly markets, and wholesale markets have major enforcement gaps. Despite their controlled environments, plastic carry bags are also frequently used on railway platforms, bus depots, and tourist spots. Furthermore, despite the availability of viable alternatives, the continued presence of SUPPs in the food business, including restaurants, food stalls, and street food vendors in all cities, raises serious concern about the effectiveness of the product ban.

“Single-use plastics (SUPs) are major contributors to the plastic pollution crisis, and the study results indicate huge gaps in the enforcement of the ban in India, especially in the informal economy. The

open use and distribution of banned SUPs is shocking; it is also being openly sold on e-commerce sites,” said Priti Banthia Mahesh, Chief Programme Coordinator, of Toxics Link. She adds, “Substitutes are available in the market but it is also crucial that a life cycle approach is taken to evaluate substitutes before their wide adoption.”

In Mumbai, one of the surveyed cities, the report has unveiled widespread usage of banned Single-Use Plastic Products (SUPPs) at various surveyed points. Notably, balloons with plastic sticks (100%), candy with plastic sticks (71%), thermocol for decorations (71%), and PVC banners measuring less than 100 microns (67%) are among the most encountered SUPPs. Additionally, restricted plastic carry bags were observed at 57% of the surveyed locations, underscoring their prevalence. Interestingly, SUPPs were conspicuously absent in specific settings such as ice-cream parlours, metro stations, railway platforms, and religious spots, while locations including bhandaras, bus depots, chaat vendors, coconut water sellers, markets, party decoration shops, vegetable vendors, weekly markets, and wholesale markets consistently exhibited 100% availability of these banned products.

“It is important to recognise that while progress has been made, there is still a substantial journey ahead in curbing the prevalence of single-use plastic products in our cities. The varying levels of compliance across different locations and product types highlight the complexity of this challenge,” said Satish Sinha, Associate Director at Toxics Link. He adds, “Stakeholders must come together and build on the positive shifts observed while addressing the areas that require immediate intervention. Our goal is to cultivate a sustainable ecosystem that enriches our communities and safeguards our planet.”

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About Toxics Link:

Toxics Link is an Indian environmental research and advocacy organisation set up in 1996, engaged in disseminating information to help strengthen the campaign against toxics pollution, provide cleaner alternatives, and bring together groups and people affected by this problem.

Toxics Link's Mission Statement – *“Working together for environmental justice and freedom from toxins.”*

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