

Beating plastic pollution

Serious implementation of new plastic waste rules can address the problem of waste

The Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules notified by the Centre on August 12 acknowledge the gravity of pollution caused by plastic articles of everyday use, particularly those that have no utility beyond a few minutes or hours. Under the new rules, the manufacture, sale and use of some single-use goods made with plastic, polystyrene, and expanded polystyrene, such as earbuds, plates, cups, glasses, cutlery, wrapping and packing films, are prohibited from July 1 next year, while others such as carry bags must be at least 75 microns thick from September 30, 2021, and 120 microns from December 31 next year, compared to 50 microns at present. The decisions follow recommendations made by an expert group constituted by the Department of Chemicals and Petrochemicals two years ago. In 2018, India won praise globally for asserting on World Environment Day that it would eliminate all single-use plastic by 2022, a theme that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stressed more than once. Yet, policy coherence to achieve the goal has been lacking. The Central Pollution Control Board has reported that 22 States have, in the past, announced a ban on single-use plastic, but this has had little impact on the crisis of waste choking wetlands and waterways and being transported to the oceans to turn into microplastic.

At about 34 lakh tonnes generated in 2019-20, India has a staggering annual volume of plastic waste, of which only about 60% is recycled. What is more, a recent study of the top 100 global producers of polymers that culminate in plastic waste found six of them based in India. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in spite of the staggering problem, policymakers have been treading on eggshells. The international view is changing, however, and support for a UN Plastic Treaty is growing; the majority of G7 countries too are supportive of cleaning up the oceans through a charter in the interests of human wellbeing and environmental integrity. India's policies on environmental regulation are discordant, lofty on intent but feeble on outcomes, and plastic waste is no different. State governments have felt no compulsion to replace municipal contracts, where companies are paid for haulage of mixed waste, with terms that require segregation and accounting of materials. Considerable amounts of plastic waste cannot be recycled because of lack of segregation, leading to incineration, while mixing newer types of compostable plastic will confound the problem. Patchy regulation has led to prohibited plastic moving across State borders. Now that the Centre has adopted a broad ban, further pollution must end. Microplastic is already found in the food chain, and governments must act responsibly to stop the scourge.