

No more plastics please

This article is authored by Deepti Ganapathy, teacher, courses on climate action, IIMB, Bangalore.

This World Environment Day, the Government of India has called for One nation, One Mission: End Plastic Pollution and launched a nation-wide campaign to promote eco-friendly alternatives to single use plastic.

While India is in the race to the podium as the fastest growing economy, we must carefully and consciously balance this phenomenal growth with our consumption of plastics to set an unprecedented example to the world.

Plastic production accounts for 5% of all greenhouse gas emissions – more than the airlines or shipping industry. This estimate does not consider how microplastics disrupt the natural cycles that store carbon. It is not an uncommon sight to see the burning of plastics in our country. Lack of climate literacy and the sheer scale of plastic use expected to rise to 70.5 million tonnes (MT) by 2035 from the current production of 24.1 MT, can create

India has, through its Mission Life, identified ways to achieving sustainable living through the very ethos of Indian culture. Now is the time to amplify this through the Make in India, formation of global consortiums such as the Solar Alliance and the advocacy through platforms like G20.

This should be done through the various Indian embassies overseas, trade associations, trade fairs and partnerships forged through FDIs and other business alliances. Though the aspect of measuring the traces of plastics may be present through various sustainability reporting mechanisms, ESG rankings and reporting, the country's companies and leadership must show resolve in thinking about long-term impacts versus short-term profits.

Though many companies claim that they are trying to reduce plastics in their manufacturing processes and bringing in a rate of circularity, it is often a mismatch from factory floor to shop floor. Take for instance the example of a Toyota Innova vehicle, which has been running on the road for 20 years. If Toyota aspires to bring in the idea of circular economy and identifies the process of investing in a scrap yard to recycle the old cars that come back to its yard–this is a far-fetched idea, since rarely do these models come back to their own scrap yard. Hence it becomes a challenge for companies to account for and calculate the rate of recycling while projecting their commitment to circularity. This is largely emphasised for products and services where plastics are used. Many studies have shown that we end up burning plastics contributing to air pollution, water pollution rather than meticulously recycling plastics at a granular level.

The less said about microplastics the better, which is said to have entered the blood stream of fetuses while their mothers may have unknowingly ingested food containing microplastics, used a cosmetic such as soap, shampoo, moisturiser, nail polish or simply added pharmaceutical products as part of their maternity kit into their environment, while exposing the mother and baby to harmful effects of this microplastics.

Finally, the clarion call must come through the youth of the country who constitute most of our population. They comprise of consumers, whether they are young children who influence their parents' consumption patterns or Gen Z who have higher purchasing power, choices and demands as consumers.

Sustainability in fashion, e-commerce, food orders, travel, purchase of gadgets and automobiles - there are plethora of claims and choices. Yet, literacy in sustainability is key. The reading between the lines, understanding of the entire value chain, implications on health and long-term impacts on environment have to be assessed and analyzed carefully.

It is here that greening the curriculum and courses at the school and college level matter. The UNESCO greening the curriculum states the following:

- The UNFCCC Article 6 and Article 12 of the Paris Agreement calls for Action for Climate Empowerment to empower all members of society to engage in climate action, through the six ACE elements – CCE and public awareness, training, public participation, public access to information, and international cooperation on these issues – are important agreements to ensure education is reflected in national climate actions.
- There is a growing call among young people that climate policies should include those that ensure their constitutional right to know about and be prepared for the climate crisis, as shown through multiple court cases raised by young people in various countries. The UN General Assembly Resolution on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (2022) and The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment 26 for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2023), calls on governments to take action to protect boys and girls in the face of the deepening climate crisis.
- Political commitments made at major international fora, such as those made at the UN Transforming Education Summit in 2022, climate change COPs, and the World Conference on ESD, also help to accelerate policy integration.

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