

4. Single Use Plastics–Environment

Despite a nationwide ban implemented three years ago, recent field studies indicate that single-use plastics (SUP) remain deeply embedded in India's local economies. Below is an elaborated and structured breakdown of the current status of plastic waste management, the underlying challenges, and the legal framework in India.

1. Background

What is Plastic?

The term originates from the Greek word *plastikos*, meaning "capable of being shaped or molded."

Composition – Plastics are synthetic or semi-synthetic organic compounds that use polymers as their main ingredient.

The Process – They are created through polymerization, where small molecules called monomers join together to form long, stable chains.

Key Characteristic – Their defining quality is plasticity—the ability to undergo permanent deformation without breaking when force is applied.

What is Single-Use Plastic (SUP)?

Single-use plastics are goods designed to be used only once before they are discarded or recycled.

Attributes – Usually lightweight, cheap, and non-biodegradable.

Examples – Straws, plastic stirrers, thin carry bags, soda/water bottles, and most food packaging.

2. Status Report – 2025 Field Study Findings

A comprehensive survey of 560 locations across four major Indian cities revealed a staggering 84% non-compliance rate with the federal ban.

City-wise Availability of Banned SUP

City	Availability Rate
Bhubaneswar	89% (Highest)
Delhi	86%
Mumbai	85%
Guwahati	76%

Sectoral Observations

Informal vs. Formal – There is a sharp divide in adherence. Organized malls and large retail outlets showed significantly better compliance. In contrast, informal markets, street vendors, and small commercial units continue to rely heavily on banned items.

Commonly Found Items – Thin carry bags, disposable cutlery (spoons, forks), plastic cups, plates, and straws remain the most prevalent pollutants.

3. Challenges – Why the Ban Struggles

The persistence of SUP is driven by a combination of economic, behavioral, and enforcement gaps.

High Demand & Low Cost – SUPs are significantly cheaper than sustainable alternatives (like bamboo, high-quality paper, or compostable starch).

Consumer Expectations – Many shoppers do not carry their own bags and expect vendors to provide free carry bags at the point of sale.

Perception of Hygiene – Many consumers mistakenly perceive disposable plastic cutlery as "more hygienic" than reusable steel or glass items, especially in street-food settings.

Enforcement Inconsistency – A lack of regular inspections and coordinated action among various regulatory agencies allows small-scale manufacturers and vendors to bypass the law.

Supply Chain Gaps – Sustainable alternatives are often not available in sufficient quantities or at price points accessible to small-scale vendors.

4. India's Legal and Institutional Efforts

India has built a robust multi-layered framework to tackle the plastic menace, ranging from constitutional mandates to specific industrial rules.

Regulatory Framework

Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules, 2022 - Prohibits the manufacture, import, and sale of plastic carry bags thinner than 120 microns.

Amendment Rules, 2024 - Introduces a strict definition for biodegradable plastics. They must be capable of biological degradation without leaving any microplastics behind. Manufacturers cannot label products as biodegradable unless they meet this "zero-microplastic" standard.

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) - Mandates that manufacturers and brand owners are legally responsible for the end-of-life management (collection and recycling) of the plastic packaging they introduce to the market.

National Initiatives

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan - Integrates plastic waste collection into the national cleanliness mission.

Plastic Parks - Specialized industrial zones designed to centralize and optimize the recycling and processing of plastic waste.

Judicial Activism - The Indian judiciary often intervenes under Article 21 (Right to Life), interpreting a clean environment as a fundamental right.

International Commitment - India is a signatory to MARPOL, the international convention aimed at preventing marine pollution from ships and land-based plastic runoff.

5. Comparison - Reusable vs. Disposable Plastics

Feature	Reusable Alternatives (Cloth/Jute/Steel)	Single-Use Plastics (SUP)
Environmental Impact	Low; reduces landfill pressure.	High; non-biodegradable; creates microplastics.
Upfront Cost	Higher.	Extremely Low.
Durability	High; usable for years.	Minimal; designed for minutes of use.
Recyclability	Generally high.	Very low; often technically difficult to recycle.

6. Recommendations for the Way Ahead

To bridge the gap between policy and reality, a four-pronged strategy is required -

Affordability of Alternatives - Support local production of compostable materials to lower market prices and strengthen the reverse supply chain.

Robust Monitoring - Implement consistent penalties and conduct joint raids by local bodies and pollution control boards to ensure uniform enforcement.

Behavioral Change - Launch targeted awareness campaigns to shift the consumer mindset from "convenience" to "responsibility."

Vendor Support - Provide incentives or subsidies for small vendors to help them transition to eco-friendly materials without losing their profit margins.

Source - <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/toothless-ban-single-use-plastic-rules-84-of-surveyed-sites-in-four-cities/article70788244.ece#~~~>

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