

NEXT IAS

**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**Regulating Single Use
Plastics**

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REGULATING SINGLE USE PLASTICS

Context:

- Ahead of the UN meeting in Canada, India chooses to 'regulate', not ban, single-use plastic.

About the Single Use Plastics:

- Single-use plastics have become a ubiquitous part of our daily lives, used in everything from packaging to consumer goods.
 - ♦ These are those that are discarded after one-time use.
- However, the environmental impact of these materials is now a major global concern.

The Global Plastic Problem:

- Plastic's invention in 1907 led to its widespread use due to affordability, durability, and aesthetic appeal.
- Major single-use plastic applications include **food and beverages (31%), bottle and container caps (16%), plastic bags (11%), and straws, stirrers, beverage bottles, and containers (7%)**.
 - ♦ However, the non-degradable nature of these materials has led to significant environmental challenges.
- India, a country with a population of over 1.4 billion, has chosen to regulate, rather than outright ban, single-use plastic.

Challenges Associated with Single-Use Plastics:

- **Enforcement and Compliance:** One of the significant challenges associated with single-use plastics is the enforcement and compliance of regulations.
 - ♦ While many governments have implemented regulations to restrict the use of single-use plastics, ensuring compliance can be challenging.
- **Waste Management:** India lacks an organised system for the management of plastic waste, leading to widespread littering across its towns and cities.
 - ♦ Many plastic items end up in landfills or as litter in the streets, rivers, and other public spaces.
 - ♦ This not only creates unsightly and unhygienic conditions but also poses severe threats to the environment and wildlife.
- **Economic Impact:** The economic impact of single-use plastics is another significant challenge. Many alternatives to single-use plastics are currently more expensive, which can burden retailers and consumers.
 - ♦ Furthermore, there are more than 22,000 plastic manufacturing units in India, and it will take time before enough numbers are brought under the alternative segment to make a tangible difference to the packaging sector's environmental footprint.
- **Health Risks:** Single-use plastics pose environmental, social, economic, and health risks to people by contributing to the climate crisis, ecosystem degradation, and resource use.
 - ♦ Microplastics, non-biodegradability, and their carbon footprint compound these issues.

India's Efforts Related to Single-Use Plastics:

- **Regulatory Measures:** In 2022, India implemented the **Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules (2021)** that banned 19 categories of 'single-use plastics'.
 - ♦ These include items such as plastic cups, spoons, earbuds, decorative thermocol, wrapping or packaging film used to cover sweet boxes and cigarette packets, and plastic cutlery.
 - ♦ However, it does **not include plastic bottles – even those less than 200ml— and multi-layered packaging boxes (like in milk cartons)**.
 - ♦ Despite the ban, enforcement has been inconsistent, with several outlets continuing to retail these goods.
 - The current ban only addresses about 11% of single-use plastic in India.
- **International Commitments:** India is a party to the **United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)**.

- ◆ In all, 124 nations are part of the UNEA, and India has **signed a resolution to draw up an agreement** in the future that will make it **legally binding** for signatories to address the full life cycle of plastics, from production to disposal.
- **Public Awareness and Participation:** The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) to manage 100% of solid waste scientifically.
 - ◆ It is being implemented with resolve, and progress is monitored, measured and results placed in the public domain.
 - ◆ **SBM 2.0** also emphasises the need for plastic management – working towards **minimising single-use plastic** and operationalising recycling and reuse through processing.
- **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR):** EPR policies, which hold producers responsible for the disposal of their products, are often part of regulatory approaches.
 - ◆ These policies can incentivize producers to design products that are easier to recycle or dispose of.

The Road Ahead:

- The upcoming U.N. meet will involve discussions on **‘problematic and avoidable plastic products including single-use plastics’**, which refer to sections of plastics that are likely to harm the environment as well as human health.
- The aim is to implement global and national measures such as removing these products from the market, reducing production through alternate practices or non-plastic substitutes, and redesigning problematic items to meet criteria for sustainable and safe product design.
- India has called a **‘zero draft’**, that vouches for **‘regulating’ instead of ‘not allowing’**, the production, sale, import, and export of problematic and avoidable plastic goods.
 - ◆ It has, however, agreed to a **‘science-based criteria’** for identifying such plastics.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] Why regulating single-use plastics is important instead of implementing a complete ban? Discuss the key efforts made by India in regulating single-use plastics.

