

BRIEF ON

BAN ON USE OF PLASTIC SHOPPING BAGS

Background:

1. Used plastic shoppers are notorious for choking sewer, open drainage system, spoiling sanitation and creating an overall unaesthetic view of environment. The practice of burning them on street sides at dumpsites produces dioxins and furans, which are excessively and extensively being inhaled by human beings. Due to their extreme toxicity to human system, they are responsible for producing serious diseases. Under universally accepted international requirement, dioxins and furans are required to be absolutely absent in air. Because of polyethylene the raw material being non-degradable in nature, the plastic bags continue to be present in the environment and contribute their undesirable impacts for a very extended period. Since they are extensively used in cities, therefore, these adverse impacts are extremely visible in urban areas.

2. Plastic bags are favored for a number of their desirable properties such as low weight, durability and for a number of their other end uses like convenience in packing food stuff and other multifarious items besides virtually no cost to the end-user i.e customer. Where the very characteristics cause tremendous rise in their use in day-to-day life there at the same time unethical disposal of the used shopping bags adds to the entire problem in totality. And the situation has appeared now in the form of a menace to the environment in the form of choking of sewage resulting in oozing out awfully dirty water on streets making stinking pools as good breeding grounds for a number of vectors of diseases like flies and mosquitos. These vectors spread diseases like cholera, typhoid, diarrhea, awful odour, contamination of drinking water thus further spreading these diseases and even hepatitis B and spoiling sanitation more dominantly in the bigger cities of Pakistan.

Efforts

3. On the request of EPA-Sindh, the Government Sindh imposed a ban on the production, sale, purchase and use of black polyethylene bags from 26 August, 1994. The Punjab Environmental Protection Department imposed ban on black polyethylene bags from 5 June, 1995.

The Balochistan Government promulgated on ordinance on 19 February, 2001, titled: “**The Balochistan Prohibition on Use and Sale of Polythene Bags Ordinance, 2001**”, prohibiting sale and use of polythene bags, in the province. Since, no color of bags is specified, it transpires that, bags of all colors have been banned. The department of industries, NWFP has banned the manufacture of polyethylene bags in the province. Similarly, there is a Prime Minister of Pakistan directive to impose a complete ban on use of polyethylene bags issued vide PM’s Sectt. U.O. No. 778/PSPM/97, dated 22-02-1997. This ban extends to all type of shoppers including black ones.

View Point

4. The manufacturers of the plastic bags oppose the ban on plastic bags, arguing that, employment of thousands of persons depends upon such cottage industries, which manufacture polyethylene bags. The ban will render many people jobless. They opine that, in absence of polyethylene bags, if paper bags are to be used then, it will involve cutting of more trees, which is no advisable. They argue that, the issue is basically that of proper collection of the solid waste. If the waste is collected by the municipal agencies on diurnal basis, then, there would be no polyethylene bags in the dustbins. Consequently, bags will not get airborne, to create nuisance. Collection of solid waste on diurnal basis will have a beneficial impact. If all the solid waste generated, is collected regularly then, the nuisance of plastic bags will be minimized to a large extent. A committee was also constituted on the direction of Chief Minister, Punjab to technically review the whole issue.

Recommendations:

5. To eliminate the problems being faced and to alleviate the situation, possible recommendations are:

- Since, employment of many people depends on this industry, any major action may render the people jobless, there is need to encourage these people to adopt alternate substitutes;
- All Solid Waste generated, should be collected strictly on diurnal basis;
- The top three-fourths portion of the dustbins should be covered. This will obstruct the flight of polyethylene bags;
- Options of biodegradable bags should be carefully considered;
- Since, the bags get airborne, due to its light weight, the manufacture of bags with adequate thickness be allowed, to prevent its flight (e.e shopping bags of foreign super stores). The Pakistan Standards Institution may prescribe the thickness and the quality of bags.
- Arrangements with plastic manufacturers may be made, who could set up recycling centers, where they can buy the used plastic bags. These can then be recycled.
- The city Government, along with the plastic manufacturers may start a mass awareness program on a large scale. This will, at least, the housewives from throwing the plastic bags outside of their houses.

Present Status:

- The Pakistan Environmental Protection Council (PEPC) in its 10th meeting decided to “Conduct a study to tackle the issue of plastic shopping bags”. Accordingly, the provinces were requested to implement the decision. The Provincial Governments while taking the significance of the issue took necessary steps, which includes:

The Government of Punjab, Government of Sindh and Government of Balochistan promulgated ordinances to prohibit manufacturing, sale, use and import of black polythene bags or any other polythene bag below a specific thickness.

- Restricted import of plastic waste, paring and scrap through import policy.
- A continuous awareness campaign through print media with the support of NGOs for discouraging the use of plastic shopping bags, promotion of alternative and its safe disposal.
- Under Activity Based Capacity Development (ABCD) Project, one of the objectives includes development of awareness campaign and other strategies to address the management and safe disposal of plastic waste and shopping bags.