

BOOST FOR GREEN LOBBY

In India, Age of Plastic may Soon Become History

National Green Tribunal wants curbs imposed on plastic packaging; hearings to begin soon

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New Delhi: The National Green Tribunal is of the view that curbs should be imposed on plastic packaging and will begin hearings in less than a month on a matter that could determine how consumer goods companies do business in India. At stake is their ability to use "multi-layered/plastic packaging" and PET bottles, which covers virtually every item of daily use, other than those that come in tins and glass bottles.

Banning such packaging would saddle companies with crippling costs, claims the industry

The tribunal has listed the matter for April 8. "Prima facie, we are of the view that there has to be restriction placed upon such packaging and generation of municipal plastic waste," said the NGT notice that was issued on March 3 but has escaped widespread attention. "However, before we pass any order, we consider it appropriate that all the stakeholders should also be heard."

Banning such packaging would saddle the industry with crippling costs, industry said. On the other hand, the NGO that filed the petition, Him Jagriti Uttaranchal Welfare Society, said the proliferation of such packaging is choking the environment and called on companies to use biodegradable material only. Plastic sachets, PET bottles and Tetra Pak cartons are used for almost everything that households buy for daily use.

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PET Peeve

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Shampoo Sachet Sales ₹3,000 crore	Biscuits ₹25,000 crore
Fruit juices sales in cartons ₹1,500 crore	Salty snacks ₹13,000 crore

**FIZZY DRINKS IN PET BOTTLES:
₹8,500 crore**

Total quantum of plastic waste generated in country
15,342 tonnes per day

Total plastic waste collected & recycled: **9,205 T per day**

Uncollected plastic waste
6,137 T per day



Banning of plastic packaging would not be the solution... what is required is industry coming together to look for a grassroots solution to manage plastic packaging waste

VARUN BERRY, MANAGING DIRECTOR, BRITANNIA

The Economic Times

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These include shampoo, hair oil, beverages and cereal besides packaged foods such as biscuits and snacks. The NGT notice noted that the environment ministry was of the opinion that further scientific study was required, while the stand of the Directorate General of Health Services is that "multi-layered/ PET bottles packaging can cause injuries to health due to leaching and other chemical reaction of the content of the plastic".

The tribunal backed up its stand by taking note of similar views by the Central Pollution Control Board and the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSO), which has sought a ban on using polyethylene terephthalate or plastic containers in liquid oral formulations for primary packing.

"There appears to be commonality on the stand of the various learned counsel appearing for the government and authorities that plastic multi-layered packaging /PET bottles would be injurious to human health," the NGT said. "It also causes serious environmental hazards. It is in fact one of the largest sources of plastic municipal solid waste." The petition by the Him Jagriti society said that once plastic is produced, it has a permanent impact because it is non-biodegradable.

"The unrestricted and unregulated use of plastics for the purpose of packaging which includes PET bottles and multi-layer packs such as Tetra Paks has significant health and environment impact," the petition said. Over the last few years, there has been an exponential increase in plastic packaging for various non-essential items including shampoo, hair oil, juices, soft drinks, food items, and so on, it said. It would allow an exemption only for water and pharmaceuticals since these are "essential" items. The petition added that the total plastic waste generated in the country is estimated at 15,342 metric tonnes per day.

Outright Ban not the Answer: Execs

Senior executives said an outright ban without a feasible alternative wasn't the answer to the problem of managing plastic waste. Such a move would increase costs steeply, they said.

"Banning of plastic packaging would not be the solution," Britannia managing director Varun Berry said. "What is required is industry coming together to look for a grassroots solution to manage plastic packaging waste."

While the shampoo market is estimated at ₹4,100 crore, up to 70%, or sales worth ₹3,000 crore, comes from sachets. The ₹1,500-crore fruit juice category relies entirely on Tetra Pak cartons. As for the ₹14,000-crore soft drinks industry, 60% of products, amounting to ₹8,500 crore, is sold in PET packs.

While every major shampoo maker in-



cluding Hindustan Unilever, Procter & Gamble, CavinKare and Garnier operates heavily in the sachet segment, firms such as Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Dabur sell close to 60% of their juice brands and colas in either Tetra Pak cartons or PET bottles. Coca-Cola and PepsiCo sell their fizzy drinks in returnable glass bottles as well, but the market has been increasingly shifting towards PET bottles, which are convenient and offer flexibility in size, apart from being unbreakable. Mass products such as the ₹25,000-crore biscuits category are also heavily dependent on sales in sachets.

"Industry should ideally have a three-five year window to come up with alternate and feasible packaging solutions," said Sunil Duggal, CEO of Dabur, which makes and sells Vatika shampoo in sachets and Real juices in Tetra Pak cartons. "Affordable and hygienic packaging is the right of the consumer."

Industry officials say biodegradable packaging, made of material that breaks down quickly in nature, is prohibitively expensive and would more than double packaging costs. Biscuits in low-unit packs of ₹5, sachets priced at ₹1, 2 and 5, juices in cartons upwards of ₹18 form the backbone of the domestic fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry.

Besides, biodegradable packaging solutions are not easily available locally, the companies said. India's biggest consumer company Hindustan Unilever declined to comment but said it would be making its views known through industry lobbies. "We wish to clarify that the matter is pending," a spokesperson said. "It will, therefore, be inappropriate to comment on this specifically at this stage. HUL will be making appropriate representation through industry bodies."

A Tetra Pak spokesperson pointed out that no decision had been reached as yet and that it would also be putting forward its stand. "Each package that Tetra Pak produces across the world is designed to not just give the highest level of protection to food, but also have minimal impact on the environment," the person said.