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# Markets slowly accept paper & cloth bags

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New Delhi: Old habits die hard, especially if they are bad habits too. In the past, Delhi's fondness for plastic bags has continued despite bans and awareness drives. However, this time, change is in the air.

The October 23 notification of the Delhi government that imposed a blanket ban on the use and manufacture of plastic bags came into force from November 23. Most affected are vendors and shopkeepers, major contributors to the 2,50,000 tonnes of plastic waste the city generates every year. Many are now making the crucial shift from plastic to eco-friendly options.

The most common alternatives to plastic bags are cloth and paper bags. Cloth bags are used for heavier items and cost nearly three times more by weight – Rs 160 per kg as against Rs 60 per kg of plastic bags. Shopkeepers who have made the switch are passing on the extra cost to the customers to maintain profit margins.

The switch to eco-friendly alternatives depends, to a large extent, on the kind of consumers. In Khan Market, the posh shopping hub in south Delhi, nearly all shops including vegetable, fruit and meat shops, have stopped using plastic bags since the consum-



**BAGFUL OF CHANGE:** A customer at the INA Market (left); piles of bags made of alternative material put up for sale at the Yusuf Sarai market

ers can afford to pay extra money for a cloth bag. Here, some shops charge Rs 5 to 10 from customers if they want a cloth bag. Still others, like Muhammad Aslam's meat shop, do not mind the extra cost cutting into their profits. "We can't be on the wrong side of the law. We have an image to maintain", says Aslam.

However, in Meherchand Market fruit vendors like Premchand still use plastic bags. So do vendors in the subzi mandi of Kotla Mubarakpur: "Neither I nor my customers can afford anything else. If I start charging extra for the

cloth bags, the customer will reject me and simply buy from the next vendor," says Premchand. But Raj Kumar, a shopkeeper in Kotla had another way of looking at things: "Stocking plastic bags is an unnecessary expense. I hope the plastic ban comes to fruition so that customers bring their own shopping bags and stop asking us for plastic bags."

There are signs of growing awareness among consumers too. In INA market, many shoppers can be seen carrying their own bags, usually made of cloth or jute. Many say they

would be willing to pay extra to shopkeepers. "I would gladly pay for a cloth bag," says an expert who did not want to be named. "I don't like plastic. But the days I forget to bring my own shopping bag, I am forced to use plastic bags because these shopkeepers don't stock anything else."

Sanju Gupta, a shopkeeper in Yusuf Sarai, too, says that customers are becoming aware and most have started bringing their own shopping bags.

The falling fortunes of plastic wholesalers are an indication of the city's changing

habits. The sullen complaint of one wholesale proprietor on Vikas Marg reveals the other side of the plastic story: "I have had to lay off half of my staff. The government is being impractical in imposing the ban. It is only the aam admi who suffers the most."

However, they have no choice but to adapt. In the Yusuf Sarai market, cloth carry-bags are displayed prominently in the plastic ware shops. Shopkeepers claim plastic bag supplies have dried up though black trash bags are available. One shopkeeper, Mohit, said the demand for cloth bags has nearly doubled in the past few days with "even golgappawallas are asking for them".

The question one must ask is why a similar ban in January 2009 did not bring about a similar change.

The stringent provisions of the ban – involving heavy penalties ranging from Rs 10,000 to 1 lakh – are possibly a major deterrent. Teams from Delhi Pollution Control Committee and the environment department have been visiting kirana stores, shopping malls and hotels to caution them against use of plastic bags. Muhammad Aslam from Khan Market says repeated checks by officials finally prompted him to make the transition to cloth and paper bags.