

Compostable bags, alternative to plastic, not allowed for retail use

Allowed Only For Agriculture & Solid Waste

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Mumbai:

The Maharashtra government which wants to make the state plastic-free, has, ironically, banned compostable bags for retail use, restricting the 100% organic material to agriculture sector.

An online brochure on plastic ban recently released by Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB) bans “any compostable plastic bags except for plant nurseries, horticulture, agriculture and handling of solid waste.”

This means if you want to use 100% environment-friendly bags, you cannot do so. For, experts say that most packing material and bags sold in market as bio-degradable have some plastic content—up to 60% in many cases. A good biodegradable packing is supposed to have 90% organic content.

Experts have questioned the government’s move pointing out that the ban notification itself says “compostable plastic does not leave any visible, distinguishable or toxic residue.” If buried in soil, compostable bags break down and degrade completely within 180 days—plastic takes hundreds of years. An environmentalist said, “It’s an irony that the brochure uses the term ‘plastic’ to refer to even compostable bags.”

Sanjay Chattopadhyay from the Indian Institute of Packaging says there are many companies manufacturing compostable or 100% biodegradable carry bags (using bio-polymer from corn or vegetables, plants). While there are several such companies in Kerala, Maharashtra and Gujarat, major milk companies in these states have also come forward to manufacture pouches on their own.

A manufacturer said that since they have the capacity to make bags for the agriculture sector, they can certainly produce more for retail use. “But without the government allowing us to enter the retail market, increasing production would not make sense,” he said.

Consequently, manufacturers and environmentalists have written to the government to allow retail use of compostable bags. “The compostable bag (as per IS/ISO 17088) standards are proven viable alternative to bags made of non-biodegradable plastics. Such a compostable plastic is developed and widely used in countries like Germany, Italy, Canada and France. It leaves very minimal impact on environment,” the letter says.

An environmentalist said that at present compostable material can be used only to make bags, because they are available in the form of sheets and cannot be moulded into bottles, but research is underway for making bottles and laminated packs too.

Asked about the government’s decision, senior MPCB officials could not find a specific reason why compostable bags are banned for all others, except agriculture sector. “Any decision on freeing the rules for compostable bags has to be taken by the apex high-power committee of the environment ministry,” an official said.

REMOVE BLOCK, FIRMS TELL GOVT

COMPOSTABLE BAGS

> Mostly made of corn, vegetables, or any other plant product



> When buried in soil, they break down completely within 180 days, leaving no toxic residue

> Their use to make bottles and multi-layer (or laminated) covers yet to be achieved

COST | ₹8-10 per bag



BIO-DEGRADABLE?

> Usually made of plastic mixed with some portion of organic compounds from plants



> Most would take hundreds of years to break down completely

> Ideal biodegradable bag is one with 90% organic content

> Research is on to achieve 100% biodegradable bottles

COST | ₹4-6 per bag

GROUND REALITY

> Most recyclable bottles (water & soft drink) available in market have only 35-40% of organic content

> They would take up to 500 years for complete biodegradation

COST | ₹1-2 per bag



> Efforts are on to achieve 70 to 80% biodegradability in a couple of years