

Resuming the Battle Against Plastics

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"From 'no-plastic', the conversation has moved to 'know-plastic', where we need to understand plastic better to use it more responsibly," says Vikram Baid, Director of Vinayak Polycon International, a plastic processing company. This sentiment was reflected in many initiatives launched by India Inc. and the Indian government in recent times, but got partially diluted by COVID-19 and the consequent high use of plastic equipment to prevent infections. There's another dimension, too. "COVID dealt a blow to the recycling industry at the grassroots level," says Atul Sud, president of WECARE, an industry association focused on extended producer responsibility (EPR) and plastic waste management (PWM). "The rag-pickers remained most vulnerable to the pandemic with their lack of safety and health benefits and awareness."

Despite this derailment, the movement against plastic pollution in India has not halted because of steps taken by the country against plastic use and the import ban on plastic scrap in 2019. Companies, too, are doing their bit, including plastic users such as sports gear maker Adidas as well as plastic generators and processors such as petrochem giant Reliance Industries (RIL) and packaging major UFlex.

"While sustainability might not have been at the forefront of the conversation in 2020, companies like Adidas have been working tirelessly behind the scenes to deliver on our sustainability goals," says Sharad Singla, Director, Brand Marketing at Adidas India. Under the 'Run for the ocean' initiative, Adidas has sold 11 million pairs of shoes made from up-cycled marine plastic waste in 2019.

"UFlex doesn't believe in wasting its waste, so not only do we recycle our own plastic waste, but we also recycle the waste generated from raw materials sourced," Anantshree Chaturvedi, VC and CEO, FlexFilms In-



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ternational (the global film manufacturing arm of UFlex), told ET. "Our recycled quantity to output has been in the range of 150-175 per cent from 2015-16 to 2019-20."

RIL annually converts more than two billion post-consumer PET bottles into fibres apart from running awareness drives for waste seg-

regation at source and efforts towards cleaning Mumbai's Mithi river. "R&D teams across our manufacturing sites are striving to improve existing products and processes, looking for new avenues to deploy more and more cost effective and efficient circularity concepts," says Vipul Shah, COO, petrochemicals business at RIL.

But what caught attention recently is RIL's use of end-of-life plastic to construct a 40km road at Nagothane. That is in line with the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways' encouragement to use plastic waste in construction of national highways, with NHAI following suit.

Experts rue the lack of a central data repository on the extent of EPR in India and its impact against plastic pollution, which is at times the reason for the trust deficit between

the three key stakeholders in the fight against the plastic problem: citizens, government and India Inc. "For long, petrochem and consumer product companies have been blamed for the earth's plastic problem. But India Inc appreciates that EPR and its effective implementation are critical to growth," says Shantanu Srivastava, Lead, Public Affairs, Thinkthrough Consulting. "The two critical stakeholders for a cleaner environment – the government and India Inc. – need to have a positive approach towards each other to understand their respective efforts better."

What's a simple solution to plastic pileup? Well, stop manufacturing new plastic. The Plastic Atlas of 2019 by the Heinrich Boll Foundation points out that 9.2 billion tonnes of plastic were produced between 1950 and 2017, which is more than one tonne for each person now living on Earth. More tellingly, less than 10% of all plastic ever produced has been recycled. "Why spend money on the flow when you have the stock?" asks Baid of Vinayak Polycon.

While India Inc adopts the three Rs of reduce, re-use and recycle for plastic, experts believe that India's proposed EPR Framework could provide the national framework for all stakeholders towards PWM. "The current challenge related to compliance across multiple statutory bodies and the non-uniformity of compliance requirements across states needs to be addressed," says Santhosh Jayaram, Partner & Head, Sustainability and CSR advisory at KPMG India. "The Act will also need to address the traceability and transparency in the system."

Atul Sud of WECARE believes that every stakeholder in the plastic value-chain has a responsibility towards PWM but the most important is individual awareness. And there is hope, says Anantshree of FlexFilms: "The younger generation is ready to pay a premium for sustainability as responsible consumption and climate change is a large part of their identity."

(This story is part of a series of articles on sustainability in association with Mondelez India. The company had no editorial input)