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No government steps so far proved effective to stop the use of banned polythene bags, which are harmful for the environment. How to stop it?



The impact of plastic bags on the environment is really quite devastating. While there are objections to the banning of plastic bags, based solely on some people's inconvenience, the damage to the environment needs to be controlled. There is no way to strictly limit the harmful impact of plastic bags on the environment because there is no method of disposal that would really help in eliminating the problem. While reusing them should have been the first step, most people either do not or cannot have policies for storing them as they are not durable enough to stand up to numerous uses. The biggest problem is that once they have been soiled they end up in the trash, which then ends up in the landfill or is burned. But the solution is very poor for the environment. Burning emits toxic gases that harm the atmosphere and increase the level of VOCs in the air while landfills hold them indefinitely as part of the plastic waste problem throughout the globe.

Plastic bag litter

EVEN when citizens try to manage their plastic bag disposal, winds play a major role in carrying them away as litter. This litter is not biodegradable and as such it tends to stay for a long period of time where it lands. A bag that is eventually ripped to shreds by winds or other factors does not disappear at once. Instead, it remains scattered in small pieces throughout the area. This can cause more problems as these smaller pieces land in drains and other waterways which, more often than not, are found clogged by these pieces. The scattering of plastic bag litter can also be attributed to human laziness. These bags might make for a good packaging on to the beach for a day but once all of the pretzels and chips are consumed one in three consumers simply allow the bag to disappear into the wind and waves. With more than 500 billion and possibly as many as a trillion plastic bags in circulation annually, it can lead to a catastrophic littering problem. Not only is littering unattractive; it is also responsible for serious environmental hazards.

The effects of plastic bags on waterways

ONE of the greatest problems is that an estimated 300 million plastic bags end up in the Atlantic Ocean alone. These bags are very dangerous for sea life, especially those of the mammal variety. Any hunting mammal can easily mistake the size, shape, and texture of the plastic bag for a meal and thus runs the risk of finding its airway cut off by swallowing them. Unnecessary deaths from plastic bags are increasing every year. Porpoises are the most common victims. As they eat sea nettles and jelly fish they are most likely to mistake the plastic bag for food. Even though they might survive the swallowing of the bag, it is unlikely that they would be able to continue with normal digestion. As such, they eventually die a slow and painful death from toxicity or intestinal blockage. The environmental balance of the waterways is, thus, being lost by so many plastic bags finding their way into the mouths and intestinal tracts of sea mammals.

The effects of plastic bags on land

The indefinite period of time that it takes for an average plastic bag to breakdown can be literally hundreds of years. Every bag that ends up in the woodlands of the country threatens the natural progression of wildlife. As its rate of breakdown is very slow the chances that the bag will harmlessly go away are extremely slim. Plastic bags are responsible for the deaths of woodland animals and inhibiting soil nutrients throughout the world. The land litter that is made up of plastic bags has the potential to kill over and over again. It has been estimated that one bag has the potential to kill one animal in every three months because of its being digested or inhaled by such animals. If you consider the number of littered plastic bags ranging between 1.5 million and 3 million depending on any location and the resulting damage to ecosystem you will surely get intimidated by the number of lives that are lost in the process. Without the balance of the ecosystem, food sources dry up and starvation occurs. With an increase in the use of plastic bags throughout the world, the effects could be devastating even to the human population.

Recycling of plastic bags

While it is a noble idea to place plastic bags in the recycling bin every week, studies have proven that there are a very few plants that actually recycle them. Most municipalities either burn them or send them off to the landfill after sorting. They resort to this because it would be expensive to recycle this type of plastic. The premises of recycling these bags are nice. Yet funding for the upgrades just has not happened and thus less than 1 per cent of all bags sent to recycling plants end up in the recycling project and most of them are left to become a pollution problem in one way or another.

Alternatives to plastic bags

There are alternatives to plastic bags and the search for more alternatives continues. Paper bags are a possible option but they also take their toll on the environment. The use of trees to increase the production of paper products combined with the increased energy that is required to make paper bags will also have a negative environmental impact. Of course, the reusable cloth bag is fast becoming a favorite among environmental supporters. While thus far no bag is without its issues, these are the bags that are currently recommended for use to help protect the environment from pollution.

Shabnam Talukder Barsha

On Friday morning last week, Rashida Khanom, a service holder in the private sector, bought a kilo of beef, a kilo of potato and some other vegetables. She carried the items in polythene bags given by the salesmen at Mohammadpur Krishi Market and a kitchen Market in the Capital. When the government slapped the ban on polythene bags of less than 55 micron thickness in January 2002, it was hailed as a major step towards reducing environmental pollution. After the ban was imposed, it worked for some years as the ban made it illegal to produce, sell, use, import, distribute and store the bags. The government banned polythene bags in line with the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995. Under the law, there is a complete ban on production, import, marketing, sales, display, storing, distribution, transportation and use of polythene of less than 55 micron thickness for business purposes. More than a decade after Bangladesh slapped a ban amid growing concern about its harmful impact on the environment, the polythene bags have staged a comeback. The use of plastic bags by the vegetable vendors in kitchen markets and salesmen in designer shops and shopping malls has been increasing despite the ban on the use, production and storing of the environmentally harming plastic bags of less than 55 micron thickness. The banned products have made a strong comeback for three key reasons— non-enforcement of laws in controlling polythene bags, the government's failure to make jute goods available and lack of interest by jute bag producers in the face of more price-competitive plastic bags.

Nearly 1,000 polythene factories operate across the country but most of them are located in old Dhaka. These factories are paying the police and other authorities to let them operate and market their products. Plastic bags are harmful in many ways. The used bags eventually find their way into drains, canals, rivers, parks and streets harming the environment. Environment experts say that the worst thing about polythene is that it is non-biodegradable and its decomposition takes a long period of time, that is, at least 400 years. Years of indiscriminate use of cheap polythene bags ultimately became a serious threat to the environment as discarded bags clog sewerage lines and surface drains, damage fertility of the soil and pollute canals and rivers.

To remove polythene from the scene, the government must be more proactive, regular raids must be undertaken to stop polythene production and marketing. People associated with production and marketing of polythene must be given exemplary punishment in accordance with the relevant law. Shopkeepers and business owners and customers who use polythene bags should also be punished and discouraged from using polythene bags. The government must show zero tolerance in this regard to discourage people from using polythene bags. The government, environmentalists and social organisations must hold awareness programmes to promote campaigns about the evils and harms of the use of polythene bags by the ordinary people. If the ordinary people are made aware of the harms caused by polythene bags in a proper manner they would be discouraged from using it. People should be encouraged more to use paper and jute bags. Bags made of jute and paper should be promoted more and people associated with the production and marketing of jute and paper bags should be given more incentives, help and assistance by the government. The polythene bag is a curse which is threatening the future of our environment. It is high time for the government and all the stakeholders to wake up and look into this matter seriously and take expeditious steps to slow down the rate of destruction of our environment and reverse the process through conservation.

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WE ALWAYS tend to harm our environment in various ways — knowingly or unknowingly — intentionally or unintentionally. It really does not matter how we cause the damage as at the end of the day, we are the ones to be suffering in any way. Have we ever thought of the polythene bags and the level of damages they can cause us? Yes, the ones we are using every now and then! They might seem very handy and convenient but the harm they can cause is just way beyond of our imagination. Of course, we must not forget that all that glitters is not always gold! Polythene bags are non-biodegradable. They also pose a serious danger to birds and other animals that often mistake them for food. Polythene bags exposed to sunlight for long enough undergo some physical breakdown causing the soil and water to get polluted. We should be alert and get into action to avoid the usage of polythene bags before it gets too late. It is better late than never. It is also high time to react and face the problem. To lessen the number of polythene bags being used, the very first thing that can be done is to avoid buying products packaged in polythene and prefer the products that come in boxes or glass jars.

Cloth shopping bags can also be used in order to replace polythene bags. Growing up the habit of using cloth or paper shopping bags can actually help to bring down the amount of polythene bags usage.

Bags made from eco-friendly materials such as recycled fabrics or organic hemp and bamboo will provide the most eco-friendly solution. This could be an easy change to make and just imagine what an impact it would make on landfill sites, polythene bag pollution, wildlife and even climate change. We can bring the change in the system once we bring the change in our habits and in ourselves. However, this should be for our own betterment. Needless to say, as to how well we want to manage our environment, it totally depends on us.

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BANGLADESH was one of the pioneer countries in the world when it decided to impose a ban on polythene bags on January 1, 2002 and there was a complete ban on production, import, marketing, sales, storing, distribution and use of polythene of less than 55 micron thickness for business purposes under the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995. Polythene bags are harmful to the environment. These bags clog drains and waterways, threatening urban environment and creating severe safety hazards. Drainage systems blocked by plastic bags have been identified as a major cause of flooding in Bangladesh during monsoon. The improper disposal of plastic bags is a threat to public health as it increases the incidence of mosquito-borne diseases. Improperly disposed of bags end up in the sewer, creating blockages and water stagnation. Plastic bags take a long period of time to disintegrate and hence pose a long-term challenge for managing the drainage infrastructure in Bangladesh. When this ban on polybags came into force it struck the ordinary people as a revolution and they accepted the ban happily thinking that it would help to save the environment from pollution. Majority of the people began to look for the alternative to polythene bags. Of course, jute bags and net-bags were the alternatives. The law seemed to be effective for the time being. Fourteen years have passed by since then. If you visit any grocery shop or even some of the shopping

malls now, you will find that polythene bags have made a comeback in the market. It also shows that all the efforts of the government and environmentalists went in vain. In order to uproot polythene bags from the market, the government and the environmentalists need to work hand in hand. A nationwide effort is needed to free the country from the adverse impact of polythene bags.

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