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Plastic: It's all in the bag

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Bengaluru, Nov. 18: It is well known that the use of the wrong kind of plastics is harmful to the environment. But did you know that a decent sized departmental store in Bengaluru dispenses about 10,000 plastic carry bags a month?

This is a cause for concern because as C.D. Kumar, a senior environmental officer of the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) explains, plastic bags are non-biodegradable and have a life span of over a 1,000 years. "It is the plastic carry bags of lesser microns, which are thinner and more difficult to segregate, that are most harmful as they cannot be easily recycled. The thicker bags with more microns can be reused, and are easy to segregate even by rag pickers," he says.

It is precisely for this reason that the Union ministry for environment and forests has now proposed a ban on manufacturing plastic under 40 microns. The ministry came out with the Plastics (Manufacture, Usage and Management) draft rules 2009 on September 26 and invited objections and suggestions within 60 days to help it frame the final guidelines.

The Karnataka State Plastic Bag Manufacturers and Traders Association is not perturbed by the possibility of the new regulations becoming law soon as it says it will affect only around 15 per cent of the over 170 plastic manufacturers in the state. “We have no objection to this as more the microns, more the cost of the bags, which will be good for our business,” says Shantilal, a representative.

But a city shopkeeper, Suresh, warns that if thicker plastic carry bags are insisted upon their cost will be passed on to the consumer. Housewives are quite clear that they don't intend to pay more while shopping just for a more environment friendly plastic bag. “I would prefer to carry a bag of my own then,” says one housewife, Shyamala.

But despite the cost involved, it goes without saying that the new rules have not come a day too soon as the world consumption of plastic is 10 million a minute, while the average per capita use of plastic per year is 4 to 5 kgs in India. And hardly 0.5 per cent of this is recycled.

Sharat Chandra, former KSPCB chairman, suggests that along with banning the use of the thinner plastics, there should be better monitoring of scientific disposal of all kinds of plastic to

make sure that they don't pollute the environment. He points out that various uses can be found for recycled plastic, such as in laying more durable roads, that have already proved how good they are in some parts of Bengaluru.